

CALYPSO OF THE APPENINE WAY



John Wallen

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Manufactured in the United States of America.

Dedicated to A-
Thanks for all your good advice on this one.

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PROLOGUE

The first time I met Eleonora, I was walking along Via Mazzini with Howard Verity. Howard had a way of suddenly darting into a moving wave of people, extracting a person from the crowd—invariably a woman—and kissing her on both cheeks in the Italian way. Usually, the people singled out in this manner were middle aged, often friends and acquaintances of his wife. On this occasion, however, the recipient of his attentions was a young, and very beautiful, red-haired girl.

I took the girl's hand, and in her eyes I saw that look a man recognises so well in a woman's glance. It was obvious that she expected me to kiss her in the same manner—but I didn't do so. A multitude of conflicting thoughts pushed through my mind in the space of a few seconds, and I decided, even in those moments, that this was something to be developed in the future. Even the natural warmth of her hand held special electricity for me—as if very strong positive and negative energies had suddenly been forced together.

How to describe Eleonora? How should I describe this girl who, in the course of just a few years, was to bring me so much that was very wonderful, and yet misery as well? What are words? How should we use them? What is their power?

If I could think that, theoretically at least, a pen could have the power to capture reality, and hold it in some beautiful guise for all time, then a half page description of this girl would be a worthy lifetime's

work. But words are sometimes treacherous, subtly shifting their meanings, and undermining perfection at the most unexpected moments, imparting only sad shadows of those significant events which have transfused and enriched our lives, like melancholic photographs, recording all the humdrum narrative of every-day without any further significance or meaning.

Eleonora was beautiful by any standards—but I have known many beautiful women, and none of them were like her. Her power lay more in a combination of simplicity, intelligence, and beauty: and your knowledge that finally the emotional truth would always prove most powerful in her relationships with the world.

Like most desirable people, she possessed an innate sense of her own uniqueness and beauty, and through this quality, created desire in others. When I first met her, she would have been about twenty-five, and in the prime of all her gorgeousness: though, in any case, I do not think that a beauty such as hers—rare and simple—would be susceptible to the aging process.

She was very proud of her hair. On that first occasion we met, it fell, tumbling thick and beautiful, all fiery red—even approaching orange in color—over her perfect shoulders and breasts. The cut of her face in its strong, almost masculine, symmetry was reminiscent of bold profiles taken straight from Italy's Roman past. Below her high, strong cheekbones, was a geometrically structured aquiline nose, and a strong, voluptuous mouth, which was shaped like a bow with a final and triumphant upward turn at each extremity of her lips. Her chin was perfectly proportioned, and suggestive of great strength of character and independence of mind. the

searing green eyes were set in that great, fine head like emeralds in a golden vault, and her spiritual and emotional life was clearly to be discerned in their constantly changing aspects. The beautifully classic and symmetrical face was lightened and made more sympathetic by a gently endearing shower of soft, red freckles.

The lines and proportions of her body were, in a word, perfect, while her dress sense enhanced her obviously very clear sense of personal identity. On that particular day, I remember, she was wearing a bright yellow cardigan, which provided a bold and gorgeous contrast to the thick red hair falling all over it.

Generally speaking, it would be accurate to say that Eleonora dressed in a diversity of classic styles, though often with great ebullience of form and colour. She occasionally surprised me, and I still vividly remember the sight of her striding down the road, lovely strong legs eating the distance, in the shortest of short, tight black miniskirts. Her long, thick—at that time, almost waist length—flaming-red hair, falling and blowing around her perfect breasts and thin, thin waist. Never have I known a girl whose outward form more accurately indicated her inner spirit; and maybe in this simple and truthful combination of beautiful things lay the secret of her continual fascination.

PART ONE

Chapter 1

THE ASSIGNATION

I came out of the apartment on Via Tiziano, closed the blue door and locked it behind me. From the next apartment I heard the usual sounds of dissention: the old man arguing with his son about a girlfriend perceived to be too common for him.

“Understand Pietro, I know how it feels to be nineteen years old. However, it is foolish to trap yourself in a marriage with that tart merely because she is pregnant. It is all a trick. She knows that you are studying engineering at the university and will make a good catch. Do you really believe that she will be faithful to you? The baby is merely the means by which she controls you. After a while she will resort to type and make a cuckold of you. Is that what you want?” the old man screamed. “Is that what you want?” The young man’s reply was dismissive.

“*Va fanculo* old man. I live my life as I want to. My decisions are not subject to your approval. Have you made such a great success of your own life that you feel qualified to give me orders?” The old man’s voice quivered with rage.

“Ungrateful wretch; you will be the death of your mother!”

I had heard more than enough and began to walk down the dark spiral staircase to the ground floor below. Usually there was an electric light on the

stairs, but for some days all the bulbs had been burnt out and no one had bothered replacing them. It really made little difference as I knew the way down like I knew the back of my own hand. As I descended, I could hear the force of the winter winds buffeting the block of apartments outside. It was a cold January night, a little after seven, and I was meeting Mario in Piazza Garibaldi in just under half an hour. Usually, the walk would take about fifteen minutes, but tonight that time would be doubled due to the wind and at least two inches of snow on the ground. It was unlikely that there would be many people around on such a cold winter's night.

When I stepped out of the apartment block, I was dismayed to see that the snow had started again. It was coming down thickly and I doubted that I would be able to arrive in Piazza Garibaldi in just twenty five minutes. Still, Mario would wait I thought. What else did he have to do?

Sheltering outside the silent building, I unfastened and then put up my strong blue and white canvas umbrella. It was actually a beach umbrella, but offered equal protection from rain and snow as from the sun. On a really windy night in Parma it might easily be blown inside out, but the weather was not that bad tonight. It was just a typically cold and inhospitable winter's night in middle January. From the doorway of my apartment block where I still stood, I could not see a single person passing by. Only a distant light, further down the road, in the direction of Piazza Garibaldi burned a fluorescent orange in the distance. This I knew was the light of the nearest bar and I resolved to stop by for an *aperitivo* on my way to the bridge

which I would need to cross in order to reach Parma's central Piazza.

I took a deep breath and thrust the umbrella out in front of me. Next I detached myself from my snug hiding place and plunged into the inclement night. The snow scrunched loudly beneath my feet as I hurried along. A dog barked in the distance and a cat miaowed laconically. It was a wretched evening and I was unlikely to meet many fellow travellers on the way to my appointment with Mario. Did I really have time to stop for an *aperitivo*? I was already late and if I broke my journey I was unlikely to arrive at Piazza Garibaldi before 7:45 PM. Still, Mario would wait. Yes...he would wait

After five minutes of breathless battle with the snow and the wind I came abreast of the little bar, "Lo Scrigno". I pushed open the door and passed into the welcoming heat inside. "Lo Scrigno" was empty but the barman, a familiar acquaintance, called out a pleasant greeting:

Buona sera, Luca. Perche sei fuori casa su una notte cosi' tempestosa?

I hardly knew what to answer, but finally I told the old bar man the truth. I needed to see a friend in Piazza Garibaldi about an important matter that couldn't wait. The old man's eyes shone with curiosity. I was his only customer on this dismal evening and a little idle nosiness would no doubt make the time go easier until he could lock up the bar and slip into his warm bed, with his wife, in the small apartment where his family lived over the bar.

Lo so che hai tanti segreti, Luca. Comunque, sei Inglese e non capisci bene come le cose vanno qui in Italia. Perche non rimani qui con me per un po'?
Ti aiuterò con il tuo cuore spaccato.

Cuore spaccato? I repeated to myself in wonderment. What did this old man know of my life in Parma? Paolo (for such was the old man's name) nodded his head wisely and then touched the side of his nose.

Si, signore. Non ti vedo da tanto con quella bella ragazza rossa. E' stato chiarissimo che eri innamorato di lei.

I gave a disconsolate grunt. What business was it of Paolo's if I was nursing a broken heart? Anyway, the old man was wrong: it wasn't true. I told him that he had a fertile imagination like most Italians and that he should mind his own business. The old bar man smiled knowingly before recommencing.

Ho visto solo due casi di amore veramente grandi. Il primo era personale...ma il secondo era l'amore fra tu e Eleonora.

Non parli senso! I spat out at the old bar man. Did everyone in this small town know everything about me and my deepest needs? Was I merely a source of gossip here for old men like Paolo and his even older wife Silvia? Why did I always feel that everyone in Parma knew everything about me and my problems? Wherever I went, knowing glances were constantly cast in my direction and I felt like the victim of some vast and baffling conspiracy. How did the people know so much? From where did they receive their information? Or was it all just my imagination? Were these emotionally sensitive people in some way able to sense and understand my changing moods—to see my feelings in my face? Perhaps they knew nothing tangible, but merely read an age old story in my darkly flickering eyes?

I finished my drink, paid and quickly left the warm bar, Paolo grinning at me stupidly as I made

my exit. Outside, the snow was easing off a little and I didn't feel the need to reopen my umbrella. I strode on past Via Botticelli on my right: the little road where my English friend Howard Verity lived with his Italian wife, Serena. Probably Howard was entertaining a few Italian guests as he did most evenings around this time. I had been to several of these little get-togethers where wine and food flowed freely, but Howard's friends with their bourgeois attitudes bored me. Howard himself was beginning to bore me. Most of all, his tedious Italian schoolteacher wife bored me. Serena was a bitch.

After passing the street in which Howard's home lay, I immediately came abreast of the old church, "San Antonio". Here a small group of Franciscan monks lived and at least one or two of them could usually be seen hanging around outside the main entrance talking to acquaintances and passers-by. Foolish old men with nothing better to do I reflected. Yes, there was someone out now, beneath the portico, talking in baroque tones to an old man with his dog. What on earth did they find to chat about? Human mortality? The grace of God? The faithfulness of dogs? I passed the two old timers and took a sharp right turn on to the old bridge in the centre of Parma. Now there were more people to be seen, scurrying in this direction and that, determined to complete their unknown business before the snow started again and the clock should slip round another hour.

In the distance, as I passed over the old bridge, I could see the burning yellow light shining out from Eleonora's office on the third floor of the Via Mazzini building. I imagined her sat flirting with some Italian nonentity and cursed. Who could resist her red hair and sexy dark throated tones? She laughed with the

dark saturninity of one who knew everything about her power over the male species. I cursed her silently.

Just now, my business was not with Eleonora and I crossed the bridge and strode past the building where the Italian girl crouched, sharpening her claws. The time was 7:45 PM and I was already more than quarter of an hour late for my appointment with Mario. But Mario would wait—if he had even arrived as of yet! Why not stop off for an *espresso* in the bar opposite Eleonora's office and next to the apartment where she lived? They—her friends—would see me and I would see them (which was not necessarily a bad thing). Also, I could warm up a little prior to the exertions of the evening.

Inside the little cafe, I found there were about thirty people sat around or stood at the bar drinking mostly strong spirits. I felt a little hungry, so I ordered a *panino* with *prosciutto crudo* and a Jack Daniels whisky. The middle aged bar man recognised me but decided to say nothing—though he did glance over at a group of three or four men who sat at a table in the far corner of the room drinking from a large decanter of wine. I'd seen them before and thought them to be friends of Fabio's. Naturally, they would report all my movements back to headquarters. Already, I sensed their interest in me and their eyes fixed quizzically on my back. One of them was dressed in a black overcoat, similar to my own, with a blue scarf around his neck. Obviously they had been sat drinking for a while, although it was hardly hot inside the bar: the outside door opened too frequently for that in order to let in frozen customers from the street.

It seemed that the boy in the black overcoat was paying me particular attention and he hardly

attempted to disguise his interest. I felt pretty sure that he'd once eaten lunch with Eleonora and myself in the mensa at Parma University. I remembered that his manners had been charming—though he hadn't actually said very much. Now he watched me with his pale blue eyes and whispered to his colleagues alternately. After a while, his friends began to steal surreptitious glances in my direction. I decided that it would be better to be moving on, so I finished the last bite of my *panino*, paid the bill and walked slowly out of the bar into the porticoed arcade outside. It had started snowing again, but at least I didn't need to open my umbrella. The portico gave adequate protection from the inclement evening and I pushed on towards Piazza Garibaldi, now only a hundred meters ahead.

The porticoed arcade was well lit and lots of people were to be seen flowing in both directions. One well-known face was caught in the light as he came pushing towards me from the opposite direction. On suddenly seeing me, his jaw dropped involuntarily and he hurriedly buried his chin in his scarf before hurrying past without an acknowledgment. I had been tempted to quote T.S. Eliot at him: "Stetson, you who were with me in the ships at Mylae!" Still, I reflected, it would hardly have been appreciated—and I really owed the man a severe beating rather than an ironic turn of phrase. I had lived in Parma for over two years now and too many people knew me, or knew of me: Indeed, I was almost famous! Two years! I reflected: so little real time had passed and yet water had hurtled under the bridge in a veritable torrent. The life I had lived before coming to Parma already seemed unreal and distant to me. Here, I had embraced my destiny in the midst of a people who lived constantly on the

edge of their emotions. Some I loved and some I hated, but all demanded a response. Indifference was not an option.

Suddenly I passed out from the porticoed enclosure and there in front of me lay the almost deserted expanse of Piazza Garibaldi. In the summer, the many bars situated there, put out tables and chairs so their guests could relax in the mild summer air. In contrast, tonight everything seemed silent and glum as I headed towards the spot where I had arranged to meet Mario: beneath the equestrian statue of Garibaldi himself, in the very centre of the exposed piazza.

Well before I arrived at the base of the impressive statue, it was apparent that Mario wasn't there. I now had the problem of trying to figure out whether he was late himself or had got bored with waiting and gone home. I reflected for a moment. Knowing Mario, I decided that it was far more likely that he had not yet arrived. I looked around the desolate square and saw few signs of life in any direction. I would give him until eight I resolved. After that, I had to be getting under way.

Perhaps five minutes later, I spied Sceriffo ambling over to the spot where I waited. I despised the man, but sometimes he could give information that it was difficult to pick up anywhere else—always provided you were ready to buy him a drink.

Buonasera, called the uneducated voice as he neared the spot where I stood. *Perche sei fuori su una notte cosi' brutta?*

I understood that I'd have to begin by replaying the earlier conversation I'd had that evening with the old man in the bar near to my house.

Ho un appuntamento col mio amico Mario. Dobbiamo parlare di qualcosa e dopo andremo in ristorante.

Solo tu e lui? shot back the odious Sceriffo. *Non sembra il modo in cui ti comporti di solito.* I wasn't in the right mood to fence with Sceriffo tonight and therefore I asked him a direct question.

"Have you seen Fabio this evening?" Sceriffo shook his head.

"No, I think he is at the university studying for a pressing exam. Some of his friends are in the bar opposite Eleonora's office."

I nodded my head. "Yes, I saw them sat down there just ten minutes ago."

"They all like and respect you", whined the unctuous Master of Ceremonies. I nodded my head again.

"That's good to know, Sceriffo." I was looking beyond the slightly hunchbacked figure in front of me to another, approaching at speed, on an old *motorino*. The quickly moving figure was well wrapped up against the weather in a blue padded coat, red scarf and white hat pulled down over the ears. It was Mario and he pulled up beside us cutting out the engine on the little *motorino*. There was a big smile on his face.

Buona sera he intoned for Sceriffo's benefit and then shook me by the hand.

"Sorry that I am late Luke", he told me in his Italianate English, "but Ilaria phoned and I had to speak to her for a while".

"That's no problem", I told him. "Shall we take a walk?" Mario understood that the suggestion to take a walk was intended to get Sceriffo off our backs, so he nodded and we moved off together, Mario

pushing his ancient *motorino* over the snow covered pavement.

Ci vediamo, he shouted briefly over his shoulder at the little hunchback and Sceriffo waved his hand and smiled slyly. It really wasn't the kind of night to be walking aimlessly round, but we felt the need to communicate in open spaces when everyone we met seemed to have an ear cocked.

"How was your study today?" I asked Mario. After working for several years, he'd gone back to school and was taking his high school diploma this year.

"Tiring, as always", he replied. Mario attended a private school in Modena and needed to travel in both directions by train—a journey of one hour each way. Nevertheless, he rarely complained much as he knew his father was paying a lot of money in order to nullify his son's past mistakes.

"What about you?" he enquired. I shook my head.

"Nothing special: the usual stuff. I received a phone call from Eva and she said that she wanted to meet us tonight in the pizzeria as she's been working in central Parma all day." Mario raised his eyebrows.

"Oh yes? And what about Sharokh?" Sharokh was Eva's live in Persian boyfriend, who though born to great riches in the Iran of his birth, had been expelled with all his family after the revolution without a dollar to his name. Now he worked as an *operaio*, or factory worker. Eva was looking to dump him and we had formed a clandestine relationship—although Eva would have been more than happy to have made it more public. Eva came from Dusseldorf in Germany and, together with Mario, she

was one of the very few people I completely trusted in Parma. I certainly never trusted Eleonora.

"What time is the appointment with Eva?" enquired Mario.

"At 8:30 in 'La Bussola'" I replied. 'La Bussola' was one of our favourite pizzerias, quiet and hidden in a dark back street near Piazza Garibaldi.

"Good", nodded Mario. "I have had nothing to eat since this morning and I am famished." We had instinctively begun to move in the direction of 'La Bussola', but Mario stopped outside an ice cream parlour. "I think that I will eat an ice cream before the pizza" he declared solemnly. "My stomach is empty and grumbling."

Mario locked up his *motorino* outside the shop and we both walked in. The shop was empty except for the salesgirl and ourselves. I noticed that she was a very pretty dark haired girl with sparkling brown eyes. Mario ordered a huge ice cream and flirted with her a little as he debated which flavours to have. I declined to take an ice cream as I'd eaten only several hours before. After a few moments, we found ourselves back outside, Mario unlocking his *motorino* while I held his ice cream.

"Actually I always stop at this *gelateria*", he informed me. "The girl is beautiful and if things continue going as they are between myself and Ilaria, I may need a new woman soon." I knew that Mario and Ilaria had been passing through a bad patch, but I was not aware that things had deteriorated so much.

"What's the main problem?" I enquired. Mario sighed.

"She wants to change me. Her father can get me a job in a bank after I finish the diploma—but it's not something I desire. As you know, in Italy the herd

mentality is very strong and the older people continually try to divert the younger ones along well known paths. Anyway, I will refuse: the boredom would kill me." I looked closely at Mario as he slowly pushed along his *motorino*. His face was dark and troubled. I knew that he loved Ilaria very deeply and would not lightly let her go. Nevertheless, it seemed that a life spent working in a bank under the cold assessing eyes of Ilaria's relatives represented a step too far for him: a step he was not prepared to take.

"What about Ilaria herself?" I asked. "What kind of work does she want to do?" I knew that at present Ilaria was working as a secretary in her uncle's computer parts factory.

"She is very intelligent", Mario replied. She wishes to become a computer systems analyst and is pursuing various courses at night school. I think she will succeed. However, I can see no future for us if she does a job she loves while I am tied into some low level bank job which I hate. Mathematics is my worst subject and the idea of counting all day and every day fills me with a terrible fear and loathing—disgust even. Perhaps I will finish with Ilaria and pursue this beautiful girl in the *gelateria*."

I said nothing. I knew that it would take a major disagreement to rupture Mario's love match with Ilaria. For his sake, I hoped that they could work it out. Ilaria had already shown her faithfulness to Mario by sticking by him after he had botched his first chance at the high school diploma and, as a result, been condemned to working in the factory.

"Well, you should take it easy", I advised him. "Don't take precipitous decisions without thinking them through. Sometimes, when you think about an issue carefully a compromise position emerges that

enables one to avoid the more extreme outcomes.” Mario nodded slowly.

“You may be right, but Ilaria will have to accept that I could never work in a bank. If she does this, we may be able to work out the rest in one way or another. Really, it is up to her.” I gave Mario a sidelong glance and almost smiled. He was very *testardo* and not too good at understanding other people’s motivations. I felt sure that, given time and effort, he could talk Ilaria around. After all, she loved him. I did not believe that he’d be making a determined effort to acquire the dark haired girl’s love at any time soon. The issue was obviously a disturbing one for him and he decided to change the subject.

“And what is Eleonora up to these days?” I hardly knew how to reply and shook my head dispiritedly.

“Some things don’t change Mario. She is, as always, a self-centred, conniving bitch.”

“But you still love her?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Who can tell? I think she is the debt I must pay for too much bad karma. I see through her; I see her shallowness. Yet she still fascinates me.” Mario nodded his head slowly.

“She is a bitch indeed. A two-timing bitch. I would ask you to drop her if I thought you were capable of doing it.” I smiled at the thought of the twenty one year old Mario giving me advice about love.

“A certain kind of emotional satisfaction is very hard to find”, I answered. “Who knows why we don’t let certain things go? Obviously I feel that I’d be losing too much, too much that was dear to myself, if I allowed her just to drift out of my life.”

"You love her so much then?"

"I think I hate her more than I love her, but sometimes it is very difficult to tell the difference between these emotions. I feel that the die has been cast and that the present situation needs to be allowed to play out to its natural close."

"And what does she say?"

I sneered. "Different things every day. She is inconsistent in everything except her beauty and her cunning."

"So are you not heading for an unpredictable crash landing?"

"Probably. But as I said earlier, fate insists that we follow certain situations to the very end, *fino in fondo*."

"Are you sure it is fate that insists my friend? Could it not just be the siren voice of your own ego?" I smiled and nodded.

"Well, perhaps I am like Ulysses strapped to the mast, listening to the sweet siren melodies. Nevertheless, I must listen to the song and, like Ulysses, make preparations so that it doesn't destroy me."

"And if the ropes were to break?"

"Then I would descend to Hades with a stupid smile on my face. Life is uncertain, but in rare situations it's worth making a stand, come what may." Mario was silent, apparently turning over my words in his mind. Finally he spoke.

"Here we are: 'La Bussola'. It seems deserted around here." Mario was right. The road on which 'La Bussola' lay seemed quiet as the tomb. I looked at my watch: the time was 8:25. Eva would either be waiting inside or hurrying along some nearby street in order to make the arrival time.

"Let's go inside", I suggested and we walked slowly towards the bright entrance, Mario still pushing his recalcitrant *motorino*. Some short distance from the pizzeria we stopped and Mario locked up his *motorino*. We could hear sounds of revelry coming from within. 'La Bussola', in addition to selling fine pizzas, was a famous expatriate restaurant and, inside, one was likely to meet travellers from all over Europe and even beyond. It was a favourite place for me too and I often arranged to meet my friends here.

Inside, 'La Bussola' was built in a rustic style with great timbers supporting the bucolic roof. Tables were arranged casually—and most of them seemed already full. A careful examination of the people present confirmed the fact that Eva had not yet arrived and so we allowed a pretty waitress to lead us into a distant corner where a still unoccupied table awaited us. I took a quick glance at the menu before ordering a pizza *margherita* and a beer. Marco followed my lead and the waitress left us. I had been watching a small bald man for a while who was eating alone at a table near to our own. His eyes never left my face and he seemed in some way fascinated with me. I had the feeling that I'd seen him before and at length he waved his hand, wiped his face with his napkin and came over to stand next to me.

Buona sera, he commenced formally. *Vi ricordate di me, signore?* I could not place my finger on exactly where I'd seen him before and shook my head.

Mi dispiace. So bene che ci siamo incontrati prima, ma non ricordo dove. The man smiled.

E' stata in mensa. Parlavamo di quella Tedesca, Eva.

Now I remembered the man. He had come over once when I'd been eating in the university cafeteria one afternoon. He'd told me that he'd often seen me with Eva and believed that she was, without doubt, the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. I had told the story to Eva herself and she'd blushed for pleasure. Still, I knew that she wouldn't have any real interest in this rather bloated and bald example of the *borghese parmigiano*.

Although the man had finished eating and was now clearing his bill with the pretty waitress, I invited him to sit down and wait with Mario and myself for the arrival of *la bella Eva*. He thanked me profusely and with a deep bow sat down. As the waitress returned with his change, Eva's bald admirer ordered another beer before turning to us both with a smile.

"So you are meeting Eva here tonight? How exciting to have the opportunity of meeting a goddess." I smiled.

"Yes, I will even introduce you to her Signore....?"

"Sacchetti. Lorenzo Sacchetti." At that very moment, I picked out the petite figure of Eva making her way towards us in the crowded room. I waved my arm in welcome and turned to the bald Italian.

"My dear Signor' Sacchetti, it seems that your moment has arrived. Here is the beautiful *Tedesca* on her way to join us now!" Sacchetti fixed his eyes on the diminutive form of Eva and seemed to sigh deeply. Within a moment, the smiling figure of Eva was with us and I was introducing her to Sacchetti.

"Eva, this gentleman is Lorenzo Sacchetti and he has been admiring your beauty from afar for some months now. In fact ever since he spied us

together eating lunch in the Mensa.” Eva smiled pleasantly at Sacchetti and extended her hand.

“A pleasure to meet you Signore.”

“Lorenzo...call me Lorenzo”, tut-tutted the infatuated one. “Up close I see that you are even more beautiful than I had previously thought.”

I could not disagree with Sacchetti. Eva was a beauty—even if an understated one (unlike the majority of Italian girls). Tonight she was wearing a heavy red overcoat against the inclement weather but her petite beauty shone clearly through. Eva had the prettiest face imaginable with a lovely mouth and rose bud lips. Her skin was clear of any blemish and fair like alabaster. She liked to keep her brown hair short, but the style suited her very much.

In addition to her beauty, Eva was also one of the most intelligent women I’d ever met, a polyglot who spoke nearly all the major European languages. She had helped me a lot with my Italian even though I was not a particularly quick student (being by no means a natural linguist like her). Eva took her place at the table and ordered a pizza and a glass of red house wine. Lorenzo’s eyes hardly left her face as she stared down at the menu and spoke with the waitress. I had invited the man over as a joke, but now his puppy dog dedication was beginning to try my patience. Or was it a most unreasonable jealousy that I was beginning to feel?

“Tell us a little about yourself, Lorenzo”, I suddenly began. “Are you from Parma? What is your job?” As the bald Italian began to speak, I noticed that his ingratiating smile remained fully directed at Eva.

“Yes, I am from Parma. Last year I finished my engineering course at the university and now I am working for my father’s engineering company here. It

is only my first year so I am mostly still learning the ropes.”

“And do you have some sweetheart?” I enquired of him mischievously. “No doubt a man like yourself, educated, refined, fortunate, will have committed himself to some beloved *fidanzata* many moons ago.”

I observed Eva almost choke herself on her wine as she listened to my words. Mario, on the other hand, appeared distant: almost as if he wasn’t listening to our conversation. Perhaps he was still struggling with the problematic situation to be faced with Ilaria. Lorenzo shook his head.

“No I am not currently *fidanzato*. While at university I had a close relationship with a fellow student called Alicia. However, after graduation we drifted apart. Her home is in Padova where she has now returned to live with her parents. Furthermore, I recently heard that she will soon marry the son of a close friend of her father’s. I wish her all happiness for the future. Our relationship had gone as far as it could have and both of us realised that we were not suited to a lifetime together.”

“What sort of woman do you think would be suitable for a man of your position, Signor’ Sacchetti?” I realised that Eva had asked the question in ironic jest, but nevertheless, I could not prevent a sudden jealousy freezing up my good humour. Sacchetti gave a big sigh.

“Ah, what a question to ask! In my job, I need someone who could be trusted to always be dignified in my meetings with potential clients. Beauty and brains should go together. On the other hand, in our private moments, the woman I choose should be funny and playful: not afraid of initiating

intimate little games that would bring us closer together.”

“I’m sure you will have no difficulty in finding such a woman Signor’ Sacchetti.” Eva’s voice sounded a little cold and I knew that she had already tired of the game with Sacchetti. In spite of her unfailing good humour, Eva had no wish to be the prize wife of a rich and influential man. If such had been her ambition she would never have had anything to do with Sharokh or myself. She was the daughter of a Dusseldorf cobbler and she happily embraced her working class roots. More than anything else she sought stability with a man she loved, though that man was always most likely to be a vice addicted adventurer of a dubious type. Previously there had been Sharokh, now there was...me? Sacchetti was shaking his head in response to Eva’s earlier remark.

“You are wrong my dear Eva...so very wrong! To find the right woman is the most difficult thing in the world. My eventual wife must combine the roles of ambassador, lover, playmate, friend, mother and confidant. Do you think it is so very easy to find a person like that?” The cold boredom persisted in Eva’s voice as she answered the newly qualified engineer.

“I think your world and the world of your parents, your family, must be filled with such admirable women Signor’ Sacchetti. No doubt they are raised to always put the needs of decorum before their own most intimate desires. I am sure you will find such a woman without difficulty.”

Sacchetti shook his head and looked confused. It was clear that he had perceived Eva’s cold indifference to him and his family’s fortune; and also that he was not used to being dismissed so easily as

a potential suitor. I was sure he would make a direct attempt to arrange a date with little Eva and his next words confirmed my belief.

“Eva, you are a most beautiful and intelligent woman. It would give me great pleasure if you were to allow me to take you out for dinner at ‘Il Piccolo Diavolo’ one night this week.” ‘Il Piccolo Diavolo’ was probably the best and most expensive restaurant in Parma: exclusive too, with tables always at a premium. Obviously Sacchetti was able to exert a little family pressure there. In spite of the bald one’s confidence as he spoke, I felt sure that Eva would disappoint him. Her next words confirmed this.

“Signor’ Sacchetti, you are really too kind. However, this is proving to be a busy time of year for me and I really don’t think I will be able to find the time. Furthermore, I doubt if my live in boyfriend, Sharokh, will be at all pleased if I leave him in order to take an expensive meal with a stranger.” Damn her! Now she’d made me angry and jealous too! Sacchetti for his part looked like he’d been struck in the face and his words were cold and hard as he recommenced to speak.

“My dear Eva, please forgive me for my forwardness. I had no idea that you were already as good as married. Of course, I extend to you all my best wishes for a happy future with this man....?”

“Sharokh”, prompted Eva. “His name is Sharokh and he is a factory worker.” This information was intended as an insult to the rich and well-connected Sacchetti and he took it as such.

“Very good. Accept my best wishes once again for your future happiness.” Sacchetti looked at his expensive rolex watch and declared himself to be late for an important appointment. He rose to his feet and gave a little formal bow to us all. “Good night my

friends. I hope you enjoy the rest of your evening together.” Having bowed and said these words, the disconsolate and angry engineer left our table and manoeuvred his way through the crowded room to the distant exit without taking a single look back. Eva flashed me an ironic look.

“Do you think I’ve disappointed him? I feel that I stopped being a goddess somewhere among the mouthfuls of pizza.” Somehow my mood had changed too and I was no longer amused by Lorenzo’s infatuation for Eva.

“He is a stupid, pompous fool. Only an untutored ego would take its own worth for granted in such a way. You are worth ten thousand Lorenzos.” I noticed that Eva’s brows puckered together at these words. She didn’t need me to tell her that she was superior to the likes of Lorenzo, but my heavy disapproval took the fun out of her ironic dismissal. For some moments, there was what is usually called a “pregnant” silence and then Mario asked Eva a question.

“How is Sharokh, Eva? Still working in that car factory?” Mario had always liked Sharokh, probably because his own problems were dwarfed by the Iranians’. Mario had failed his exams and gone to work in a factory. Now his father had given him a way out and within a short time he should be free to go to university or search for better work. In contrast, in spite of his wealthy beginnings, Sharokh seemed doomed to a hopeless life as a factory worker. In spite of this, he always remained positive and upbeat.

“Sharokh is fine, Mario. He is meeting me in the ‘Oktoberfest’ at a quarter to ten. I hope you will both accompany me there later and we can have a drink together.” Mario looked at his watch and seemed to

make some calculations. At length he nodded his head.

“Yes, that is fine for me. I need to be up very early tomorrow morning in order to catch the train to Modena, but it’s really OK as long as I get home before midnight.” Eva gave me an inquisitive look.

“And you Luke? You don’t have any pressing engagement.” I smiled and shook my head with assurance.

“What possible engagement could I have? I suggest we stay here for another half hour or so before strolling slowly to the ‘Oktoberfest’ for 9:45.”

Conversation continued between the three of us in fits and starts, becoming ever more desultory, before Eva recognised an American guy she had worked with in the room. He was sitting with friends, so Eva merely waved over at him. However, he immediately left his friends and came over to say hello. I had met him once or twice and didn’t like him.

“Eva, so nice to see you here”, he gushed in his put on Italian style. “I know I’ve been trying to get you to come here for some weeks, but I’d just about given up on ever really seeing you sat here enjoying yourself with friends.” I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. I thought it was fairly clear that we weren’t enjoying ourselves and that we must have appeared morose to any outsider who had been observing us. Eva nodded and smiled.

“Yes, well I finished a little late today and Luke and Mario kindly consented to meet me here. We will be leaving in a few moments as we have an appointment at the ‘Oktoberfest’.” Di Matteo (for such was his name), shot me a quick and inquisitive glance before continuing.

"That is a pity. I had hoped to introduce you to a few people over at my table."

"Another time, Di Matteo", I rudely butted in. "We are just picking up the check before leaving. Don't worry, we are well aware that you are mostly to be found hanging around inside 'La Bussola'. We will find you another time." The American gave me a nasty look before making a little formal bow, wishing us a good evening and withdrawing to his own table. As I paid the bill (which also included the cost of Zacchetti's beer), I spoke to Eva with some asperity.

"I really don't understand what you see in that American idiot. You know that he is of the type who thinks a smooth word can get him whatever he wishes. By talking to him on occasions such as these, you are merely encouraging him to believe that he has a chance of going to bed with you." Eva's eyes flashed her rage.

"Sometimes you can be very crude, Luke. He is an acquaintance, a work colleague: nothing more. Let's go." We stood up and retraced the earlier steps of Lorenzo through the crowded space. As we left, it was clear that the restaurant was far fuller now than it had been on our arrival, about an hour earlier.

Outside, the January wind caught us in an unexpected gust that quite took our breath away after the cosy warmth of 'La Bussola's' interior. I suddenly realised that I'd left my umbrella inside the restaurant but felt insufficient concern at the cold and snow to go back and retrieve it. Eva was also without an umbrella.

Silently, each person preoccupied with his or her own thoughts, we walked back in the direction of the town and the *birreria*: the very same direction that Mario and myself had come from an hour earlier. It was snowing lightly and Eva and I snuggled closely

together as we walked along in order to generate some body heat. Mario walked alone, a little distance in front of us. The streets seemed absolutely deserted at that hour and no doubt the worsening weather conditions had kept many would-be revellers indoors this night. Eva, Mario and myself were made of sterner stuff and a little bad weather was hardly likely to make us alter our plans even in the smallest degree. Both Eva and myself were hard bitten north Europeans who knew the very worst conditions that the continent could impose on weary travellers. And Mario? For the time being, Mario was an honorary north European too!

Via Garibaldi was filled with shadows and half light as we made our way along the great central artery of Parma that connected the outside suburbs with the very centre of the city itself. Along this thoroughfare there were shops and commercial dealers of every description: jewellery shops, ice cream shops, tobacco shops, small restaurants and big restaurants. Most of all, however, there were the boutiques and clothes shops run by independent artisans. To my jaundiced north European eye, they appeared to be all grossly overpriced. Nevertheless, even to a sceptic like myself, most of the materials looked handsome and well made. Horses for courses, I thought. Parma was one of the richest provincial cities of northern Italy and most of the locals were more than well enough heeled to delight in over-spending for their necessary trifles in life. Eva pretended to take the same attitude as myself to the overpriced luxury of Parma; yet as with most women, one felt that it wouldn't take much to make a rebel of her and send her screaming and possessed into a melee of berserk shoppers waving her hard

earned lire over her head like some half demented lunatic.

As we passed the *gelateria* at which we'd stopped earlier that night, Mario seemed to perk up and he looked long and hard through the glass front of the shop hoping to catch the eye of the dark haired girl within. However, I could make out that she was surrounded by five or six customers and mostly obscured from our sight.

"I think Mario is in love", I confided to Eva, still clinging next to me and warm at my side.

"Really?" she replied questioningly. "With Ilaria, you mean?" I took a quick look at Mario who was now walking alongside us—and seeing that his face never changed its expression I decided that it would be OK to rib him a little.

"Oh yes, always with Ilaria", I replied. However, one such as Mario is unable to keep all his loving for only a single woman. On our way to 'La Bussola' this evening, we took a *gelato* in this place—and it seemed to me that the poor girl who served us, was infatuated with our brave Rudolf Valentino here." Eva laughed while Mario responded by giving me a dirty look and saying nothing.

"What on earth will Ilaria say if she finds out that you have roving eyes Signor' Mario?" asked Eva bending over and across me in order to look in Mario's face and see what emotion it might be registering: I thought surliness was the predominant feature.

"Don't listen to Luke, Eva. He is only joking. Yes, of course; Ilaria is my woman and I love her very much. Nevertheless, seeing how changeable women can be, it is never a bad idea to keep another in reserve—just in case anything should go wrong."

"And what might go wrong?" enquired Eva, a little nettled by Mario's words in spite of herself. Mario shrugged.

"Who can say? It is clear though that a little fame or flashiness can often turn their hearts away from one who loves them deeply. If this were to happen, a man would look foolish indeed if he had not provided another beauty for himself; in reserve, so to speak." Eva laughed; but I could see that Mario's words had irritated her.

"And why might a woman leave a partner except for the common enough occurrence of a man cheating on her, or not treating her with the respect and dignity she craves and deserves?" Mario shrugged again.

"I wouldn't know Eva. However, I am convinced that it is best for both men and women to prepare for all possibilities in their relations with each other." Eva gave a strained laugh.

"I see you have been spending too much time with Luke, Mario. These are his ideas I'm sure." This time Mario shook his head lugubriously.

"No Eva. These are my own ideas—though I respect Luke's viewpoints very much. It is my own experience with women that has led me to these—admittedly somewhat sour—conclusions."

I knew that Eva was thinking of Sharokh. Clearly, he loved her dearly and would do absolutely anything for her. Yet here she was with me, a well known double-dealer. Looked at dispassionately (if that was possible), Eva's actions seemed to support the truth of Mario's words—and she didn't like it.

By now we had reached the end of Via Garibaldi and the mounted statue of the great man himself came into view on our left. We took a turn into Via Mazzini and once again passed all the bars in

Piazza Garibaldi, before taking refuge from the still falling snow flakes under the porticoes that led back to Eleonora's house and office. Everything was darker than before and few people seemed to be any longer abroad in the swirling, snow infested night.

When we were about half way down the porticoed arcade of Via Mazzini, it was time to cross the wide, undefended road and take the small side street down to the *birreria*, 'Oktoberfest'. As we crossed the street, three abreast, the snow, which over the last half hour had been coming down ever stronger, whirled around our forms and covered everything with a fine sliver of white. In particular, our overcoats and scarves picked up the snowflakes in abundance so that to anyone we came upon unexpectedly, we would give the impression of being three shapes freshly returned from Hades's underworld—possibly on some hopeless mission sanctioned by the goddess Persephone herself.

The street lights burnt strangely dim as we entered into the small side street that led down to the *birreria* and passed the little cinema on our right which this week was showing a new biopic of the sixties group, "The Doors". I knew that Mario was a great fan of the group and also that he'd been along to see the movie with Ilaria a couple of evenings before. So far, I'd forgotten to ask him of his impressions of the film, so now, as we approached the yellow light of the silent *birreria*, I decided to enquire about the movie.

"So how was this movie, Mario? Worth the entrance fee?" Mario seemed to consider deeply for a few moments before replying.

"Certainly worth the entrance fee, though far from being wholly satisfactory."

Oh?" I responded. "What was wrong with it then."

"Nothing in particular", replied Mario. "The only real problem was that it was made as a biopic and so the director felt the need to cover everything. The story was too long and wide ranging to be adequately treated of in just a couple of hours. This was the main difficulty. However, there were other smaller ones too. Certain parts of the real story were romanticised while others were glossed over entirely." I nodded my head in an understanding fashion.

"Plenty of good music anyhow?" Mario's face creased up into a smile of sheer pleasure confirming what I already knew: that he loved Jim Morrison and the music of 'The Doors'.

"Oh yes", he confirmed redundantly. "The music is always something special."

We were now outside the *birreria* and through the glass I could see the Sicilian, Paolo, waiting behind the counter. He was alone, but no doubt his three sons, I thought, were busy serving the student clientele in the basement below. As he saw us, through the glass window, he waved his hand vigorously in the air and shouted his greetings. I pushed open the door and we entered into his establishment.

Buona sera amici miei. Che piacere di riverdervi su questa notte brutta e tempestosa! There was always a certain level of irony in Paolo's words—and so it was this evening. Paolo and all his Sicilian family had become good friends during my stay in Parma. He helped in various ways—particularly with information.

Grazie Paolo, I replied. *E' davvero una notte brutta. Siamo qui per incontrarci con Sharokh,*

l'uomo di Eva. At these words, Eva gave me a dirty look, while Mario's face was expressionless and conveyed nothing. Paolo simply shook his head with a *non e' qui*.

"It seems he's not yet arrived", I said to Eva, a little amused at her obvious irritation.

"Yes, thank you, Luke. I can speak a little Italian" (her Italian was quite brilliant and far better than mine). "It's only 10: 40 PM and I imagine he'll be here in a few moments now."

The three of us took our places at the single table on the top level, which was right next to Paolo's counter. I ordered German lager for myself and Mario and Eva ordered *spremute*, or crushed orange juices. The drinks had just arrived, when Sharokh walked into the *birreria* and offered us all his greetings. He exchanged a few words with Paolo, whom he knew quite well, before ordering a small beer and sitting down next to Eva. He appeared to be in high good humour, but he often seemed this way and I was doubtful about how much of the true Sharokh I was really seeing on these occasions. Much of his bonhomie was clearly for Eva's benefit. He wanted it to be clear to her that he harboured no suspicions regarding her behaviour and that myself and Mario were regarded as deep and sincere friends. It was a dangerous game he was playing and it was only because of my own infatuation with Eleonora that the pretense had been allowed to continue for as long as this. I attempted to make some small talk.

"Anything interesting happen in the factory today?", I enquired. Sharokh shook his head.

"Nothing interesting ever happens in that damn place, except on the last Friday afternoon of every month when we all receive our pay—not that we get

much.” I knew that Sharokh picked up about a million and a half lire monthly. As he said, it wasn’t a lot; but it did enable him to keep some dignity and get out of the house instead of always begging for money and being underfoot. Perhaps, it even assuaged his pain somewhat, as he didn’t know what Eva was getting up to while he was slaving away in the motor factory.

Eva looked uncomfortable at Sharokh’s words and she asked him if he’d paid the rent to the landlord before setting out to pick her up that evening. Sharokh confirmed that he had indeed done so. Eva and Sharokh lived some kilometers outside Parma in a little village called “Felino” On arrival from Perugia, they’d had to pay six months rent in advance, a sum that had come directly from Eva’s pocket. Now, the six months had finished and they were back to paying on a more regular monthly basis again.

The whole conversation with its inevitable lack of transparency was beginning to bore me and I finished up my beer and ordered another one. Mario did the same, this time ordering beer. Eva was less than half way through her orange juice and Sharokh seemed to be deliberately going slow with his small beer.

“What’s the matter with you, Sharokh?” I enquired. “Do you intend to make that small beer last all night?” I understood that the Iranian would be driving Eva home and that he had a responsibility to not drink too much, but this in no way stopped me from taking some pot shots, at his expense.

“It is the car, Luke”. Sharokh replied in a matter-of-fact tone. “As you know, it’s only six months since I passed my test and I don’t want to drink too much as it could lead to a preventable accident. Would

you forgive me if we were in an accident and Eva was to be injured?" I looked at Sharokh's face closely, but could detect no hint of irony on it.

"No, of course not", I replied seriously. "You are certainly doing the right thing in not drinking too much. On the other hand, I am unsure as to why you decided to get a house so far away from the centre of Parma. Wouldn't it have been better to be more central?" At this point, Eva joined in the conversation.

"That question is easily answered, Luke. We took the apartment in Felino because it was far cheaper than anything we could find in Parma of a similar size and quality." Of course, I was well aware that this had been the reason for their choice; but I was still in the mood to turn the knife in the wound a little.

"But surely, when you take into consideration the amount you pay for the car and petrol, it would have been cheaper to live in the centre." Again, I knew that what I was saying was nonsense, but it was amusing to see Sharokh twisting around to explain his present impecuniousness. In the Shah's Iran, his family had been related to the Royal Family and all of them would have been killed by the revolutionaries if not for their contacts who'd been able to convey them secretly out of the country: Sharokh and his brother to Perugia in Italy and his parents to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In Perugia, Sharokh had met Eva who had convinced him to come to Parma with her. Sharokh's brother remained in Perugia as night watchman in a small hotel.

All this while, Sharokh had been staring at me in some irritation.

"Surely, you know better than that, Luke! You are a driver yourself and you know that while the petrol is expensive, housing is a lot more costly. In Felino, I'd say we have everything we wish. It is a beautiful small village and the people are friendly too. We have already made friends with several couples who live nearby." Now it was my turn to get angry.

"Oh yes, and who might they be? I must say Sharokh that it seems to me that you are making this drive to Parma on a very regular basis. Felino is an extremely backward place and the people are suspicious of strangers rather than friendly. As for these great 'friends' you have made, I'd be glad to know exactly who they are." At this point, Eva made a hurried interjection.

"Sharokh is exaggerating. There is an Italian couple living in an apartment close to ours who we sometimes meet on Sunday afternoons for a drink and a game of cards in the local bar. There is really nothing to it." At this point Sharokh interrupted Eva with a tightly constricted voice.

"Is it not true that we have been their guests for lunch and dinner on several occasions? Isn't it also true that they'll be coming over to eat with us tomorrow night? Certainly, I have come to regard them as friends and I think that you have too." I was listening with attention and curiosity as Eva made her reply.

"Sharokh, they are acquaintances. Are we so desperate for friends and general acceptance here that as soon as we see someone a couple of times they are regarded as dear soul mates? Don't be ridiculous. Of course, we don't want to spend all our time only with each other: that would be merely boring. However, try to keep things in perspective

instead of forever spreading stories about new friends!"

I felt that Eva's answer pretty much covered all the bases—and I was confirmed in this idea as I watched Sharokh sink into a lugubrious silence, a look of utter hopelessness etched on his features. At this point Mario seemed to wake up from his personal preoccupations and began to speak with Sharokh whom he had always viewed favourably due to the perception that they had both been ill treated by fate in the same way. Of course, I was aware that the two really shared little in common. Sharokh had nobody but Eva to support him in Italy and the daily job he did in the factory was absolutely essential to his health and well-being. On the other hand, Mario, although his father had frightened him by making him work in a factory for a spell, was the favoured son of a rich engineer who would always make sure he was taken care of. Sharokh was also aware of these discrepancies, but as long as Mario was too naive—or perhaps just too young—to see them, he was happy to play the part of senior big brother on the factory floor who always had a younger colleague's interests at heart.

"Sharokh, how much was your car?" asked Mario. "I am thinking of buying a second hand Fiat from one of my friends, but I'm not sure how much I should pay."

"Our car was obtained at a special price through the help of a friend in Perugia", answered Sharokh. "Tell me Mario, how old is the car you are thinking about buying?" Mario shook his head vaguely.

"I'm not exactly sure, but I'd say it's probably at least ten years old. It could be more." Sharokh looked business-like. "In that case, don't pay more

than three or four million lire. How much is your friend asking?"

"He wants seven million lire", Mario replied.

"Don't pay it!" responded Sharokh decisively. You will undoubtedly have engine problems with a car so old and very likely difficulties in obtaining parts as well. You will be tearing your hair out in a month if you pay such a price—and I can guarantee that you will no longer view this person who is selling you the car, as a friend anymore. Actually, I would advise you not to buy the car at all as it's at least ten years old. I would advise you, rather, to look carefully for a car that is no more than five years old. You should be able to obtain such a car for no more than five or six million lire. I don't think your friend is really doing you any favours by offering you his car at such a price."

Eva and myself kept quiet during this discussion, not having the slightest interest in Mario's intention to buy himself a second hand car. Personally, I was aware that the price was not of great importance as Mario's father would pay as long as he was convinced of the necessity for his son to own a car.

"Thanks so much for your help, Sharokh", responded Mario gratefully. I am sure that I would have foolishly bought that car at my friend's asking price if not for having had this eye-opening little talk with you." Sharokh laughed.

"My friend, please don't think about it at all. Are we not brothers of the factory floor? What would comradely relations be coming to if one factory worker was not able to help another?" At these words Mario laughed and nodded.

"Yes, I still feel myself to be a factory worker. Most of my friends still work there and I have little in

common with the people I am now mixing with in the *Liceo*. Once a worker, always a worker.” I was fully aware how fatuous these words of Mario’s were—and so was Sharokh. However, we both felt a need to keep silent now. Confronting Mario with the obvious would do neither myself nor Sharokh any good. At this point, Sharokh asked me a loaded question.

“Luke, how is Eleonora these days? We haven’t seen her for so long. Is she still studying Law at the university during the day and then working in that office by night?” I took a quick glance at Eva’s pallid face before answering.

“Yes, she is fine and continues to study and work. In fact she should be finishing at the office in a few minutes.” Sharokh nodded enthusiastically.

“Why, isn’t the office just around the corner from here? Why don’t you go and get her and bring her here? It would be nice to chat with her after so long.” Eva looked uneasily from Sharokh to myself.

“Probably she is tired and hungry”, the German girl commenced. “We should allow her to eat and sleep.” Sharokh laughed.

“Well, she can eat here—sleep as well if she likes! Do go and get her Luke. I’d really like to see her.” I glanced at Eva’s face and saw that it was hard and white. Sharokh was looking at me triumphantly, while Mario had a whimsical look on his face. To tell the truth, I actually wished to see her myself, so I slowly nodded my head.

“Yes indeed, why not? Order another round of drinks and wait for me here. I should be back in about ten or fifteen minutes.” I rose from my seat, thanked Paolo and walked to the door. Through the window I could see that it was now snowing harder than ever.

Dove vai?, enquired Paolo as I pushed open the door and made ready to plunge into the storm tossed night.

Vado per prendere Eleonora I explained to the old Sicilian, who in response gave me a knowing smile.

Ah...la bionda?

Sì, I responded, suddenly tight and angry inside. *Proprio la bionda. A presto.* I left the comfort of the *birreria* and hurried back in the direction from which we had come. As I walked quickly ahead, I could easily see that the street was now completely covered with a fresh coating of undisturbed snow. What on earth could I say to Eleonora to get her along to the *birreria* on a terrible night like this? Perhaps the mere knowledge of Eva's presence there would act as a kind of challenge and make her come. However, I suddenly realised that that there were no guarantees. It would be perfectly possible that she would refuse the outing and return to her warm apartment. I glanced at my watch: just coming up to ten. That meant I still had a few minutes. By the time Eleonora had checked everything and was ready to leave the office, the time had usually ticked around to at least five past ten.

At the end of the road, just past the cinema showing the movie about 'The Doors', I turned sharply to the left into one of the main thoroughfares of the town: Via Mazzini. Now I was once again protected by the great porticoes. Few people were to be seen traversing the great street—and the few that could be discerned were mostly hurrying along with their heads inclined and their eyes fixed upon their feet. I could find no obvious explanation for their behaviour except to think that perhaps they were minutely examining their shoes for storm damage

that might show up in the light of day. Italians, as everybody knew, were neurotic about their shoes.

After about five minutes I ducked into the little boxed-in enclave where the entrance to Eleonora's office lay and pressed the buzzer. After a wait of about ten seconds a familiar voice came on the intercom.

Si? Chi e'?

Sono io. Apri la porta.

The door in front of me gave a sudden jerk and opened heavily. I pushed it forward and all the lights along the winding stairway suddenly lit up. For a moment I stood in the vestibule, a sudden feeling of stark fear unmanning me. Finally, however, I began the steep climb up to the first floor where Eleonora's office lay. I knew that she would, in all likelihood be alone there, as most of the bosses left around nine-thirty, leaving the competent (if crazy) Eleonora to close up.

I wondered why I felt so nervous. When was the last time I'd seen Eleonora? I made a quick calculation and realised that it had already been more than a week. In a certain sense, a little bit of Eleonora went a long way. Nevertheless, most of my waking hours were filled with dreaming about her—and my dreams themselves were simply Eleonora's: they belonged to her! She knew very well about the complete infatuation she created in men—and she fostered that craving. It might even be said that while her men lived off their infatuation for the beautiful red-haired girl, Eleonora herself got off on being the sole object of their infatuation. Nothing was more likely to end a relationship with Eleonora than the knowledge that a man who was with her was taking an inappropriate interest in another woman. She was Ulysses's Calypso entrapping a man in her

personal space and after that, never permitting him to leave again. Like Ulysses, her man might spend each day weeping on the sea shore, but the evening belonged to her—and her Queenly charms could never be resisted.

During the time it had taken for these thoughts to formulate in my mind, I'd reached the landing of the first floor and, glancing to the left where I knew the office to lie, I saw the familiar glass door with the painted message on it: Fernando Bertinotti, MD. Through the door, I could see Eleonora sat alone, behind her computer, at the secretarial desk. She was looking towards me and smiling as the temptress Circe might have smiled at Ulysses's men before inviting them into her castle to become pigs.

I took a deep breath and walked in.

Chapter 2

ELEONORA

As I pushed through the glass door and walked toward the place where Eleonora sat, lazy as a crouching tiger, I noticed the green eyes fixed on me in their usual ironic mockery. What was so funny about me was a question I often asked myself. Others didn't seem to view me as a living, walking joke. Obviously Eleonora was privy to certain information unknown to everyone else.

"Well, well," she began, "if it isn't Luca here all alone." I slumped down into the seat opposite Eleonora, saying nothing. "No Eva, this evening?" enquired the Italian girl, whose eyes were still set on me, grinning with their private knowledge. "Did Sharokh whisk her away to Felino then? Poor John." At last I spoke.

"Eva is round the corner with Sharokh and Mario in the 'Oktoberfest'. Sharokh, for some strange reason has expressed a desire to see you...so put your coat on, close this place up and let's get going." Now Eleonora's eyes changed, flickering their uncertainty, not so confident anymore.

"I don't know if I can. I'm studying for an important exam...another time."

"Don't worry", I replied soothingly, "it will only be for a short spell; one drink and then we'll all be off. You'll be back in your warm little apartment, studying

with Fabio, before you have the time to say: *avvocata*."

The mention of Fabio had the effect of disorienting Eleonora and for a moment she was silent, sucking absently at her bottom lip and staring into space. At last she spoke.

"Perhaps I will come. It will be interesting to see Eva and Sharokh again." I noticed that she didn't mention Mario. Poor Mario was mostly regarded as a schoolboy loser by Eleonora and she never seemed to have much time for him. Of course, the feeling was a shared one and I sometimes asked myself whether the real reason for their mutual antipathy was not the fact that they were both astrological lions with big egos.

"Yes, do come. As I say, Mario is there too (this latter comment was included merely to irritate her) and it should be quite a party." Eleonora had, by this time, regained her ruffled composure and she smiled at me sweetly, showing her even, white teeth.

"A party you say? On a night like this? In a *birreria*?" and she gave that great dark, rich-throated laugh that had already ship-wrecked so many mariners before me. "If I come, be sure that I will not stay there for more than fifteen minutes. As I said before, I must study—and I'm also tired." At these words I raised my eyebrows.

"How can you possibly be tired when you sleep all day and sit here doing nothing all night?" At these words, Eleonora's eyes narrowed. She was not to be made fun of with impunity.

"Last night, for your information, I went to Milan after work with some students. We entered a night club at around midnight and never left until three o'clock. That is the reason I am tired." I nodded slowly; inside, my head was filled with a wretched and

impotent anger, but I was not going to give Eleonora the pleasure of seeing this. I smiled.

"A drink now will be good for you; after, you can study and sleep". Eleonora threw back her mane of deep red hair in a contemptuous fashion.

"I think you should know by this time that I rarely drink alcohol. If I come, it will only be to take an orange juice." All in all, I felt that things were looking good: this girl's "if" was as good as another girl's "when".

A somewhat oppressive silence settled over the two of us. There was too much history between us for any small talk to be necessary on occasions such as these. I simply watched her, switching off her computer, the fax machine; moving like a caged in panther, with grace and a controlled threat. Tonight she was wearing a smart blue suit that showed off her well curved body to perfection. I remembered that when I'd first arrived in Parma I had tried to describe her unique attractions—and failed.

"Is Fabio ready for his next exam?" I enquired as Eleonora continued to bustle around the office, making sure that everything was switched off and in its right place prior to making a final closure. At the mention of Fabio, she turned to me and smiled (or was it a snarl?)

"Oh yes indeed, Fabio is always ready for his exams. He is the number one student in the Law Department—perhaps even the university." I almost replied that it was a pity he was so boring; but I knew that such a comment would lead us nowhere.

"What about your southern love, Hylenia?" enquired Eleonora craftily. "Were you able to visit her last week as you'd planned?" I shook my head.

"No, I wasn't able to visit her. I went to Milan and saw Sara instead."

Capito. La troia Americana? I smiled at Eleonora's insult. She had never liked Sara since hearing me talking on the phone to her one day. In fact I'd enjoyed my time greatly with the rich, but street-wise, Sara. What a pity that she was only just eighteen years old! She was almost as beautiful as Eleonora herself—and far, far sweeter. What a very pleasant time it had been in Milan. I had written down my impressions of that special day as soon as I'd arrived back in Parma. The events themselves had been mundane enough, but something of great importance had taken place that day—between the lines of our normal discourse so to speak.

"If you're ready, let's go" I said, shifting in my chair. "Our friends won't wait there forever."

"Your friends won't wait there forever", she tossed back. "I have enough friends. These are merely acquaintances." I smiled.

"But you did so much to help Eva find an apartment when she first arrived in Parma! I am quite sure that both Eva and Sharokh regard you as a close personal friend."

"More fool them", I heard her mutter as she continued to complete last minute jobs. "I don't like Germans."

"But why on earth not?" I enquired in mock surprise. "After all, your country seems to have a long and intimate history of close involvement with them. Caesar and the barbarians, Mussolini and the Third Reich, the Common Market..." She interrupted me on a fine point of detail.

"Caesar never fought Germans, but Gauls. The fighting with the Germans came much later." Off hand, I wasn't sure if this was true. Hadn't Caesar crossed the Danube at some point? In any case, it

wasn't important and I dismissed the matter from my mind.

"Did you lose a little weight?" I enquired. "You seem rather thinner than the last time I saw you." Eleonora's eyes glittered at me angrily. It was not the kind of enquiry she welcomed. Men were supposed to only note such things and not comment on them. The unspoken assumption between Eleonora and her admirers was that she was always in a state of perfection.

"What about you?" she tossed out at me. "I seem to think *la tua pancia e' piu' piccola*." I permitted myself to smile at this. Whatever shortcomings I might have, a growing belly wasn't one of them. Suddenly, the phone rang and Eleonora stopped rushing around the office, returned to the secretarial desk and picked up the receiver. She listened for a moment and then began to speak.

Non posso dire precisamente. Devo fare una cosa per venti minuti. Immagino che sarò a casa fra mezz'ora. Avremo tanto tempo per studiare. Sì...Sì...Certo. Obviously this was Fabio calling to see if Eleonora was on her way home. It sounded like he wanted to immediately get underway with their studying. But what did he have in mind to study this evening—his books or Eleonora herself?

"Fabio?" I enquired innocently. "He wants you back home as soon as possible? Why Eleonora, I didn't know that you would ever allow your movements to be controlled by a man in such a way." She gave me a stinging look.

"As you know, we study together. He is quite a genius at the university and he wants to help me."

"So kind of him," I muttered involuntarily. "They say his father is quite a big shot over in Fiat", I

added, compounding my earlier comments with what I knew would be regarded as an unwholesome negativity.

“And who are ‘they’”? enquired Eleonora, apparently with real curiosity.

“Oh, I don’t know. Parma is a small town and these things—gossip—get around. Is it true?” Eleonora smiled dryly.

“Oh yes, it’s true.” I looked at the clock on the wall and saw that the time already stood at 10:15 PM. The folk in the *birreria* would be wondering what was happening—and might even drift off soon if we didn’t put in an appearance.

“Come on, Eleonora, it’s late,” I exhorted. “If you’re coming, get a move on.” I’d heard her tell Fabio that she’d be a little late getting back, so I knew she’d decided to come along with me to the *birreria*. However, Eleonora was never pleased when anyone took her actions for granted and she peered at me now through narrowed eyes.

“Maybe I won’t come after all. It’s getting late.” I shrugged my shoulders.

“Please yourself, dearest, but I did promise Eva and Sharokh. They’ll be very disappointed if you don’t come now; especially after making them wait for so long.” For a moment Eleonora seemed to consider, weighing up her options in her mind. Finally, she grabbed her overcoat and started walking over to the door.

“OK, but time to leave this place now”, she called over her shoulder. “Are you coming?”

I jumped out of the chair and caught her up just as she got hold of the glass door with the intention of slamming it shut. She pulled it to and it relaxed into the closed position with a strange buzz. Next, Eleonora closed the great wooden door over the top

of the glass door. Finally, she produced a great key from her handbag and turned it three times. Nobody seemed to take any chances with thieves in this Catholic and would-be saintly country. God would provide!

As soon as we were out on the landing and descending the stairs, the automatic lights switched themselves on. There wasn't really sufficient room for the two of us to descend abreast of each other, so Eleonora went first and I followed a few steps behind. Given the opportunity, I enjoyed the possibilities which presented themselves for "accidentally" bumping into the Italian girl from behind. I heard her mutter thickly once or twice.

Madonna, cosa fai? Non sono un cavallo! Ti rompero' il collo se mi prenderai per le spalle ancora! I merely laughed. I was enjoying myself and Eleonora's discomfort, perversely perhaps, merely added to my sense of amusement and the absurd. We were lucky to reach the foot of the stairs in one piece without rolling down to the bottom in a great entangled ball! We passed outside and discovered everything was still: nothing and no one was moving.

Tenderly, I took Eleonora's hand and squeezed it: she did nothing to stop me. Slowly, we walked outside the enclosed arcade where the office block was situated and headed towards the nearby *birreria*. The snow had virtually stopped, but the ground was becoming very slippery. We clung closely together, both wishing I dare to say, that life was simpler: that it would allow two closely connected souls to easily partake of each other without any thought for tomorrow. Perhaps life had once been like that, but division of labour and "progress" had changed everything. Now we had to think about studying and careers and house making;

about what clothes we were going to wear and what school our child was going to attend. We had to think about where we were going to on vacation this year, when we would get a raise in our jobs, how much would our pension be worth in real terms by the time of our retirement and, finally, where our mortal remains were to rest for all eternity. It was a heavy agenda and enough to kill all true romance. The way I felt about Eleonora (and, I think, the way she felt about me) was too deep for such considerations to enter into our special equation. Ludwig Wittgenstein had once said that immortality belongs to the person who lives in the present moment. That was how I felt about Eleonora: I loved her so much, that I could never compromise that love with mundane things. If we ever had a child together, then I felt sure I would even feel jealous of my own offspring as I watched him or her dumbly fondling next to my beloved's breast and extracting her sweet milk. As for the ordinary considerations of life, they would kill our romance completely. Not perhaps the deep down feelings of besotted love, but our ability to function together would be destroyed. An all consuming passion does not exist to be circumscribed within a marriage contract.

Suddenly in unison and content, we turned sharply right and walked down the old road on which Paolo's *birreria* was situated. As we reached the orange light, I looked inside and saw that our three friends were still waiting. I was a little surprised—and even disappointed. Something deeply irrational in my make-up had been hoping that they would have gone by this time, leaving the solitary upstairs table for Eleonora and myself: a few more minutes stolen from mortality to stare into each other's eternal eyes. However, it was not to be. Instead of this, we would

go inside and greet those three strangers like friends. Each of us, under the guise of this crafty friendship, would seek to undermine the others and soon this closeness with Eleonora would be merely a memory of the past. We went inside; and as we passed into the *birreria*, there was a chorus of voices that greeted our arrival.

“Where have you been?”

“We were just about to leave.”

“I need to go in just a few minutes if I am to get up on time tomorrow morning.”

Buona sera amici miei. Cosa volete?

We settled down into the free chairs around the table and made our orders. I asked for a large beer (Eleonora, who disliked alcohol, gave me a dirty look) and my beautiful Italian partner requested a squeezed orange juice and hamburger. She was obviously a little hungry and Paolo’s restaurant was famous for the quality of its fast food. Eva smiled falsely at Eleonora.

“It is so good to see you again, Eleonora after so long a time. How have you been? I guess you are studying a lot?” Eleonora nodded her head emphatically.

“Oh yes, I study all the time—and I really shouldn’t be here now. I just thought I’d come along briefly and say hello to you all.” At this point, Sharokh broke into the conversation.

“How is the wonder boy, Fabio doing? Still as brilliant as ever?” Eleonora nodded.

“Oh, yes. Quite the best student in the university I’d say. He seems to know everything without even doing any work. I wish I was like that.” Sharokh gave a little high-pitched laugh.

“You two will be an awesome pair when you get married. He will be one of the most important men in

Italy and you will be the ideal hostess. What perfect parties and dinners you will throw together for Italy's influential men and women."

Eleonora said nothing to this, but seemed to take an intense interest in the examination of the inside of her glass. I thought that Sharokh was taking things a little far in his desperation to cause me pain and I decided it was time to bring him down to earth.

"And what do you hear about Italy's influential people on the factory floor Sharokh? Do you know something that is hidden from the rest of us?" As always Sharokh responded to being knocked back with his penetrating laugh.

"Oh yes", he continued. "The factory floor is the best place to pick up news about the state of the nation, scandals and peccadilloes of great men and women."

"Don't you ever get tired of that job?" I asked, for the moment adamant and pitiless. "You are still a young man and should have other possibilities before you than an old age on the factory floor." Sharokh started to whimper in his 'I love Eva so much' voice.

"Eva and I have made tentative plans to return to Germany. I will have more possibilities there and the two of us can bring up a family together in tranquillity. I think I'd like to study engineering as my father did." Eva gave Sharokh a dirty look, before watering down some of Sharokh's assertions.

"The truth is, we don't know about how the future will play out at this stage. We are both happy here and I am doing quite well in my job. It is always a possibility to eventually return to Germany where the standard of living is good. However, at this stage we have no actual plans for doing so." It was a put

down and everyone read it as such. Sharokh sulkily finished his drink and ordered another one in the silence that followed. I too ordered another drink. Mario, was looking at his watch frequently and ordered only a coca cola. Eva and Eleonora both still had glasses that were half-full. Eva decided that it was time to change the subject.

"How are you finding the evening job these days, Eleonora? I guess it pays the bills and gives you plenty of time for study." Eleonora looked at Eva with irritation in her eyes as if she were thinking: "how do you know who pays my bills, or what I do with my time?" Nonetheless, she nodded and answered the German girl civilly enough.

"Oh yes, I've been doing it for a long time now and am well used to it. It's really like second nature to me by this time." Suddenly Mario stood up and pronounced his determination to leave. Tomorrow was an important day for him as he had an exam in Modena which he must pass. Therefore, he thanked us for our company and wished us a pleasant continuation of our evening. He, on the other hand, must leave in order to get some sleep. We all muttered our goodbyes and Mario paid for his drinks and left.

"Strange boy", said Eleonora after a moment. "He seems like a puppy dog faithfully following Luke around all the time." I laughed before replying.

"You should try it some time yourself, my dear." Eleonora's eyes grew angry and cold.

"That is what you would like I know, but believe me, it will never happen. I know all your tricks and will never fall for any of them."

"Oh yes? And what are my tricks?" I asked curiously.

"You are selfish and only think about yourself", replied Eleonora harshly.

"And on what evidence do you base such a deduction?" I asked calmly enough—though I was irritated inside. Eleonora tossed back her head and laughed sharply.

"On what evidence? *Madre di Dio!* On the evidence that you exist and are sitting here next to me!" As a criticism, this seemed rather oblique, so I decided to let it pass. I noticed Eva looking a little embarrassed and thought I'd make light of Eleonora's remarks.

"Eva knows very well that I'm not selfish. I've helped her in many different ways...and of course, she's helped me as well." At these comments, Sharokh seemed to come alive and he commenced to speak in his usual unctuous tones.

"Eva and I really appreciate your friendship Luke—and we know that you value ours too. It's amazing how close we've all become in such a comparatively short space of time." Eleonora gave a short grunt at Sharokh's words. Eva remained silent with a troubled expression on her face.

"What you say is very true, Sharokh", I recommenced. "We have become like the three musketeers with the motto: 'All for one and one for all'. Eleonora, of course, must be D'Artagnan." At this perceived slight, the Italian girl showed her irritation.

"*Per carita*. Don't include me in your heroic fantasies. I am just a poor girl from Suzzara working in an office every day in order to pay her way through university. From where do you come up with these fantastic ideas?" I gave a restrained little laugh.

"I'm sorry, Eleonora. It is the poet in me: the adventurer in me! I see life as one great opportunity that the brave person might scoop up in his hands. It is only pusillanimity that is the enemy of achieving everything one desires."

"I see", replied Eleonora coldly. "Your ego tells you that you can take whatever you like from life. But if you think carefully about your position, you will understand that it simply is not true. By no means can you have whatever you want in your life." I knew that what the Italian girl said was true; but that didn't stop me from continuing to bait her.

"Most people just follow the rules, Eleonora. They don't understand that opportunities are waiting everywhere for the person who doesn't allow himself to be restricted in his actions by rules that were made for someone else's benefit."

"So you never follow the rules?" asked Eleonora, ironically.

"Sometimes I do. When the issue is not of grave importance, I might do so. One cannot continually confront more powerful people over every trifle. However, when an important issue comes up I will contend with anyone to get the resolution I desire. Naturally, if one has previously been fairly docile that will give a certain surprise element when one does revolt."

"Even while you are talking about action, you are doing nothing other than prove yourself to be an intellectual full of hot air", scoffed Eleonora. "Someone who was really an adventurer would not think in these terms. They would simply act without rationalising everything." I shook my head in protest.

"You are wrong, Eleonora. The man you describe as an 'adventurer' is a mere weakling tossed this way and that by every passing humour.

The true adventurer is the man who understands the nature of society and all its rules and uses these intellectual powers to forge his own way.”

“To me, your intellectual adventurer seems like a coward who only wishes to wet his toes in the water.” Eleonora spoke quietly and seriously. “Essentially, he watches for the best opportunity and then acts when there is little possibility of any real danger. Isn’t that right?” I shook my head sadly.

“Not at all. You are being deliberately stupid over this. The true adventurer might act according to certain rules himself, but he is always ready to act at the most effective time whatever the danger. Take Lenin and Trotsky in the Russian Revolution...” Eleonora gave a contemptuous laugh.

“Now you are citing exemplars of your position like Lenin and Trotsky? These men were criminals and not adventurers.”

“And who decides who is an adventurer and who is a criminal? Who makes the rules by which we take these decisions? Generally, it is the ruling ideology of the time and specifically the many media that put it into action. Lenin and Trotsky were great intellectuals and also courageous men of action, but the ideology around us insists they were criminal madmen who established a police state. Objectively speaking, this is not so—but it’s difficult to look beyond the dominant ideology of the state.” By this time, Eleonora had tired of our conversation and she merely insisted I was crazy (*lui e’ pazzo!*) before turning to Eva and asking her about her new life in the deadly dull village of Felino.

“How are you finding Felino? Perhaps it is rather quiet for you? The people there are not dissimilar to those in the small village where I come from: decent enough in themselves, but closed and usually

suspicious of strangers. Do they give you any problems?" Eva shook her head.

"No, not really. Sometimes, as you say, the place is a little dull; but usually, the people are friendly and respectful. Of course, the bus timetable to Parma is horrendous and we would be completely lost if not for the car." At this point Sharokh interjected a guffaw.

"Yes, and don't forget the driver. I was not at all sure about my ability when I took the test, so we should feel happy that I passed. If not for our good fortune in that area, we would not be living in Felino now." At Sharokh's words, something tightened inside me and I felt my words coming out in an irritable fashion.

"And is it so wonderful that you live in Felino? I think it would be better if you lived in Parma itself." Sharokh gave a sharp laugh.

"Luke, I think you're forgetting that I work in Felino. Imagine if I had to drive there all the way from Parma every day! Fortunately, I am also able to drive Eva into Parma whenever she wishes. Given that Felino is so much cheaper than Parma, I think we have found the perfect solution." I grunted and said nothing. No doubt Sharokh was right about the things he said. Personally, I was only interested in Eva and the ease with which she could be found.

"How long have you been driving, Luke?" enquired Sharokh craftily. I'm surprised that you haven't bought a car yourself." I gave another grunt.

"Long enough to get a suspended jail sentence for speeding. As I am living in central Parma, I don't feel the need for a car."

"But surely it's inconvenient when you want to travel somewhere?" the Iranian pressed on. "How do you travel?"

"I use the bus, the train and my feet", I answered. "A procedure that keeps me fit and healthy."

"But a car is very convenient", insisted Sharokh.

"Yes, it's convenient", I agreed. "But far from indispensable." At this point, Eva broke into our dialogue.

"I must learn to drive myself. Everything will be so much easier when I don't have to rely on Sharokh ferrying me to and fro." Our eyes immediately locked as if an indiscretion had passed and Eva looked down at her drink confusedly. Sharokh eagerly began to speak again in his most nauseatingly whiny tone.

"Oh don't think about that Eva. I don't mind driving you around at all. *Anzi*...it's my real pleasure. Furthermore, if you are to drive independently then it will be necessary for us to have two cars—and at present we simply can't afford that. No; we will continue as we are and you will permit me to drive you to all your necessary appointments." I shook my head sadly.

"Do you see now what I was talking about? Living out in Felino is either going to be prohibitively expensive, or it will be the cause of constant tension between the two of you. Certainly it was a mistake for you to get an apartment so far outside Parma." Eva gave me an annoyed look.

"Don't worry Luke. We are coping OK. Perhaps in a few months we will start to think about moving. However, for the time being, there is no real problem." I decided to take another swing at Sharokh.

"I'm sure that Sharokh cannot feel very comfortable in such a narrow minded, petty-bourgeois place. Not after all he's been through,

seeing his family expelled from Iran and then split up and desperately hanging on in different parts of the world.” Eva smiled.

“Oh it’s quite OK. These experiences have taught Sharokh patience and he is now able to put up with everything.”

“Any indignity whatsoever?” I queried. Sharokh’s eyes were filled with a bright anger as he forced his way into our exchange.

“The difficulties and setbacks I’ve been through have taught me patience. Certainly they haven’t crushed my spirit. However, I am only one person existing in a time of vast movements of people. I can dodge or be crushed and I prefer to dodge. Nevertheless, there are some things I will not compromise on.”

“For example?” I shot back at the young Iranian who had experienced so many indignities in his comparatively short life.

“For example”, he continued, “I will never cease to speak the truth as I see it. I will never cease criticising the role of America in manipulating the people’s of the world for their own advantage. As we all know, the Americans put the Shah in power and maintained him as Head of State. However, they ignored the way the people felt and that led to the Iranian Revolution—something they had never expected. America believes it can socially engineer all countries to be partners in its aim of global hegemony. I do not think that this idea is a true or just one. If the will of the people is consistently ignored then revolutions like the one that happened in Iran will begin to happen all over the world and the American agenda collapse.” There was a moment’s silence. Neither Eva nor myself liked the direction of American foreign policy and Eleonora really couldn’t

care less. It was not my wish to let Sharokh escape from the personal issues we had previously been speaking about, so eventually I said:

“Don’t you think it’s nobler to resist in a clear and unambiguous way? What’s the point of spouting all this stuff when, on your own admission, you get out of the way sharpish whenever you are personally threatened?” Sharokh’s eyes flashed in brilliant anger.

“You are distorting what I said. I merely made the point that if I can do nothing in a particular situation then I might as well keep quiet and get on with my life. If I am put on the spot in a specific way, then, as I mentioned before, on some things I will not compromise.”

“And what may they be?”, I asked again.

“If I am asked to renounce my family, those that I love: this I will not do”, concluded Sharokh rather lamely.

“There is nothing particularly meritorious in that. Anyone will protect their family, the people they love. An activist will go beyond that and support a whole group, a whole class.”

“Then I am not an activist”, responded Sharokh almost sulkily. We continued drinking in silence for some moments. Eventually, Eleonora spoke.

“I think I can see someone outside that I know. Please excuse me for a moment.” As Eleonora got up and moved towards the exit, I peered out of the window. Outside in the inhospitable snow, I could discern a shape and even a face. It was Fabio lurking in the interstices between light and darkness, myth and reality. Eleonora stepped out of the *birreria*’s warmth and began to converse with the figure in the darkness.

"I expect he's telling her to come home and study", said Eva smugly. "It must be lonely for him sat there with his books open, all alone." I nodded my head. "Very likely. There is something of the Svengali figure about that guy. I really don't like him." Provided with this information Eva smiled and Sharokh smirked.

"Who on earth is 'Svengali?'" asked the smirking one.

"Svengali was a character written in a book more than a hundred years ago. He exerted an unhealthy and finally fatal influence over a young woman, Trilby. However, his training did enable the hypnotised Trilby to sing like an angel." At this, Eva laughed again.

"Between Eleonora and Fabio, I'm not sure who is controlling who. My suspicion is that Eleonora herself is pulling most of the strings: getting the help of the rich boy intellectual with her university career. I fear that our friend Fabio is infatuated and will eventually pay the price of most infatuated people."

"And what, pray tell, may be the price of infatuation?" I asked dryly. This time Eva merely smiled, knowingly.

"Oh the same price that is paid for most obsessions eventually: failure and ridicule." Failure and ridicule! I mulled the words over as I continued to watch Eleonora chat with the obscure figure lingering in the shadows, outside the *birreria*.

"Well, I must admit that he seems to be very well trained", observed Sharokh, striving to make out the dark figure more exactly. I am sure that both Eva and myself had the same simultaneous thought: Sharokh should know all about that, as no one was better trained than he! Anyway, his observation certainly seemed to be accurate as the three of us

watched Fabio teeter on the edge of the real world, before pulling back into the darkness he seemed to prefer. After a few moments Eleonora re-entered the *birreria*—alone.

“Oh it was just the boy I study with. He has an exam tomorrow and wanted to remind me that my own exam will be coming up soon as well. I told him to go home and put in the necessary work for tomorrow’s test. I think that my presence at this time will merely distract him from doing his best work.” Eva and I exchanged involuntary glances on hearing Eleonora’s words. Sharokh looked disappointed. No doubt he had been hoping that Fabio would join us and mix things up emotionally a bit. After a pause of several seconds, Sharokh was the first to respond to Eleonora’s words.

“Eva and I always got on very well with Fabio. Please give him our good wishes for his exam when you see him again later on tonight.” Eleonora gave Sharokh a single flash of her green and fiery eyes, before announcing her plan.

“Why don’t we all go and eat a pizza in ‘Il Tempio’? Now, Fabio is studying I don’t want to disturb him for an hour or two—as of course I will do, if I go banging around the apartment with cooking utensils.” Personally, I needed little convincing.

“Great idea! I’m starving too. You’ll come?” I enquired turning to look at Eva’s set face, pale in the artificial light. Sharokh—whom I had deliberately ignored—began mumbling apologies in his whining tone.

“It’s a great idea—great idea! But I can’t see how we can manage it. To tell the truth I am desperate for sleep at right this very moment and I must get up at 5:30 AM tomorrow morning. I’m afraid I must take Eva home before my ability to drive

becomes seriously compromised.” Eva nodded her head.

“OK, we’ll come—but we won’t be able to stay for more than an hour or so.” Sharokh gave his beloved the quiescent glance of a wounded animal before draining the last of his beer in a morose silence. Eleonora made as if to rise from her seat, intent on hurrying us along to the new venue. I finished off the last of my beer and we all rose in unison to pay off the tab and make our exit from the *birreria*. Paolo seemed disappointed that we’d decided to leave.

“Ah, you will not find beer like mine in a pizzeria. Why don’t you stay here and eat and drink a little more?” queried the old Sicilian, as I paid off the bill without protestation from any of the others.

“It is always a pleasure to eat and drink here, Paolo” I replied. However, the ladies are hungry and wish to eat a pizza. I am sure you are well aware of how futile it would be to try and change a lady’s mind once it has set itself on something. We will see you again shortly.” With last good-byes to the Sicilian and his sons, we left the *birreria* and entered into the darkly tenebrous night outside. Not a soul was in sight, though the snow did seem to have stopped. The white flakes that had fallen earlier, scrunched loudly under our shoes as we walked slowly along. ‘Il Tempio’ was no more than a five minute walk from the *birreria* and even tonight we would cover the distance in less than ten.

At the end of the road in which the *birreria* lay, we veered right past the cart where the florist usually sold his goods during the day and entered, once again, under the protecting porticoes of Via Mazzini. I walked between Eleonora on my left and Eva on my right. Sharokh was grasping Eva’s hand tightly

on the far right, as if unsure as to what the rest of the night would bring and in search of reassurance. Eva looked straight ahead into the heart of the night. Eleonora seemed the most vivacious of us all and kept a light-hearted patter going as we walked along.

"I know that this is by no means an unusual time for you to be out, Luke; but please remember that the rest of us are not playboys and eating out at this time is a rarity for us. If you see me fall asleep during the course of our meal, please wake me up discreetly. I am well known to most people around here and they would get the wrong idea if they were to see you carrying me home." I smiled at the not unpleasant idea of having to carry Eleonora back to her flat.

"Don't worry my dear", I responded. "Given that you are almost entirely tee-total I don't believe there will be a problem. Sharokh, on the other hand, is a different case entirely and we should all watch him to make sure that he doesn't go over the limit. After all, he is not responsible only for his own safety, but for Eva's too." Eleonora bent over and began to make enquiries of Eva on my right.

"Why on earth didn't you learn to drive yourself, Eva? It is an essential skill. I really don't know what I'd do if I wasn't able to drive home and relax every weekend." Eleonora was from a nearby village, Suzzara, and mostly drove back there every weekend—even though her parents could sometimes be a little troublesome.

"Oh, I don't know", began Eva uncertainly. "Now that Sharokh has passed his test, I feel that the need for me to drive is no longer so pressing—and the expense, as Sharokh pointed out, is a consideration too. Nevertheless, I do intend to learn within the next

year. However, I admit to being a little apprehensive as I am not sure that I will take to driving very easily.” At this point Sharokh decided to weigh in with his point of view.

“I don’t think that we can afford another driving course within the next twelve months, Eva. My own course was very expensive even though I finally managed to pass first time. What if at the end of the course you should fail? We would have spent all that money and be no further on. It will be much better if we wait until we are well in control of our finances before paying for another course.” All this seemed rather rich coming from Sharokh as he probably contributed no more than twentyfive per cent to their joint finances. Obviously, the same thought had occurred to Eva as well, because she replied to Sharokh sharply.

“I believe that having some independence in my comings and goings is of very great importance Sharokh. Of course, it’s necessary to prioritise things; but in my opinion paying for a driving course is absolutely essential for the well-being of our relationship as well as being vital for my own purposes.” Sharokh looked uneasy at the new twist Eva had given to his words.

“Why do you think that paying for a driving course has anything to do with the quality of our relationship? You know very well that I am always happy to take you anywhere you need to be and later to pick you up again.” Eva nodded her head sympathetically.

“Of course Sharokh, you have been very good; but sometimes our needs and schedules just don’t match very well. For example, tonight you wished to go home rather than eat at the pizzeria. If I’d had my own car I could have let you stay home for the

evening and rest. It wouldn't have been necessary to bring you out here in order to pick me up." Sharokh was left looking stunned at the implications of what Eva had just told him. In future times, he would be left at home while Eva drove out to Parma without him. He hurriedly did his best to turn the situation around.

"Please don't misunderstand me, Eva. I admit to feeling a little tired tonight, but I am always happy to do whatever you wish. It is a pleasure for me to feel that I am being of real use to one I love so much." Eva moved ever so slightly away from him with an exasperated gesture.

"Don't make so much of everything Sharokh! Why are you always so intense? There is no reason at all why I should rely on you all the time. I want to drive. I am sure I will enjoy driving. Do you wish to keep me always dependent on you?" Eleonora hadn't spoken for a while, but she'd been taking everything in with interest. Now she decided it was best to change the subject.

"What are your future hopes, Sharokh, beyond the factory?" she asked mercifully. Sharokh's pain-filled eyes flickered away from Eva's face and across to Eleonora's. For a moment, he seemed to have some difficulty in understanding the question. Finally, however, he answered.

"It's difficult to say, Eleonora. Perhaps I have no real hope" (at this point, the Iranian gave Eva an accusatory glance). "However, sometimes Eva and I have spoken about getting married and going back to Germany together. Once I was settled in Germany I could perhaps go to college or university there and acquire some real skill. On the other hand, I am not an ambitious person and the difficulties I have faced in my life up until this juncture have taught me to be

appreciative of small advantages. It would not be unpleasant to me if Eva and I simply stayed here in Italy for the rest of our lives. The life of an *operaio* is hard but honest and as long as I knew Eva was waiting for me at home, such a repetitive destiny would not be so difficult." At that point, I think we all felt bad for Sharokh. Destiny had certainly treated him shabbily enough, sending him tumbling from a position in one of the best and most monied families in Persia, to the role of desperate *profugho* here in Italy—all within the space of ten years or less. Perhaps he deserved a break more than most of us. Eva responded in a more gentle and appealing tone.

"Sharokh, you know that I will always do whatever I can to help you. At present, I must remain here in Italy, but at some point in the future, you will come to Germany and I will make it my task to see you receive a good higher education there. I promise you this independently of our relationship as whatever happens, we will always be the best of friends." No doubt Eva had expected her sincerity to sound a receptive note inside Sharokh, but her words merely seemed to alert him to the fact that Eva was thinking of a future life without him.

"Of course we are friends", he stammered, "but we are more than that too. We are lovers and soon we will be husband and wife as well. Why do you talk as if our relationship was merely temporary?" Eva shook her head in a bewildered fashion. She had spoken to Sharokh honestly, but had only received pain and incomprehension in return. Now she decided to revert to the easy lie.

"It was just a manner of speaking Sharokh. Of course we will remain together and one day soon we will travel to Germany together too and your

possibilities will grow.” At these words of Eva’s, Sharokh seemed to take heart and, suddenly, his enforced gaiety returned. He turned a smiling glance in Eleonora’s direction.

“What about you, Eleonora? What plans and hopes do you have for the future? Will you marry Fabio and become a lady of leisure?” Eleonora gave an exasperated laugh.

“Good heavens, how curious you are Sharokh. I have no idea what my future holds! How very boring life would be if we planned every step with exact precision. One needs to leave oneself open to the unknown, the thrill factor that might twist everything in a new direction. It is this that gives life its interest. How tedious it would be to say that I will study, find a job, get married, have children, grandchildren, sicken and die! There has to be something extra to give life a true interest.” Eva smiled at the Italian girl’s words.

“Perhaps you mean a lover? You need all these things, but also a lover to give an injection of excitement into your life?” Eleonora frowned.

“More than a lover, I think Eva. There needs to be some dangerous and unpredictable process at work in my life that gives everything else meaning. No one should be able to rely too much on my good will. One is already among the living dead when life has become a mere sequence of tedious rituals.”

The direction the conversation had taken was troubling to me. Wasn’t I the unknown factor in Eleonora’s life that could give meaning to the rest of it? But that was only because I was inherently unpredictable and lay outside the normal bourgeois categories of assessment. Eleonora might need someone like myself to give meaning to the more mundane aspects of her life—but what did I need?

Was it enough for me to be her unpredictable lover? Could I even perform the same function for several other ladies at the same time? Would that satisfy me? Certainly it would not satisfy Eleonora because the factor in her life that gave the rest of her existence meaning, needed to be exclusively hers. There was no question of her willingly accepting any kind of “time share” arrangement. But the question that troubled me most, related to my own deepest needs and expectations. What was a worthwhile life as far as I was concerned? Eva needed her intrinsically traditional arrangement with job, house, husband/ boyfriend and security. Eleonora on the other hand was far more genuinely transgressive—though perhaps seemingly more conformist on the surface—than Eva. However, in the end she too needed the acceptance of the faceless bourgeoisie. What did I need? I was hardly able to put it into words—partly because its complete selfishness and arrogance almost took my breath away. Most of all I needed to live experiences that I could turn into a lifetime of artistic endeavour. For that, I would make any sacrifice and suffer all hardships. And what if, in the end, all my artistic dreams went unrealised?; my attempts to make great art through the arrangement of letters on the page were all ignored—or even laughed at? In that case, my own life would have proved to be far more tragic than that of any of the other three people I walked in company with this night!

By this time, we were approaching the end of the great arcade of porticoed columns in Via Mazzini and we could see that the snow had begun lightly falling once more. The pizzeria lay opposite the statue of Garibaldi in the great central square we had passed through previously and, as we looked at

the world beyond our safe protective columns, it seemed amazing to appreciate just how totally alone we were. Not a single other human being was in sight as we passed out beyond our protection and into the snow filled street. Fortunately, our destination lay straight ahead of us and it took only a few moments to pass over the white stained cobbles and to reach the welcoming and brightly lit porch of the restaurant. One by one, we filed inside. The interior of 'Il Tempio' was decorated in a welcoming style with Ionic and Corinthian columns decorating all the walls. Downstairs, all the tables seemed full and on catching the waiter's eye, he motioned us over to the dark stairs in the bottom right corner of the room that led up to the usually empty first floor. Whenever we came to 'Il Tempio', we preferred to eat up on the first floor so as to avoid the noise and restricted spacing below.

In a group, Eva leading the way and Eleonora bringing up the rear, we filed silently up the stairs. At the top, we were met by one of the experienced waiters and he arranged a quiet table for us in the bottom left corner. Only a few people were dining up here, some couples and groups of friends. It was noticeably a lot quieter than things had been downstairs. We arranged ourselves comfortably at the table. On one side was Eva and Sharokh, on the other Eleonora and myself. We asked the waiter for a liter of red wine and a liter of water (the latter mostly for the girls), while we studied the menu. It was proving to be quite an alcohol fueled night—at least for Sharokh and myself. After we'd made the order, Eleonora saw someone she knew—another student—sat at one of the other tables with her boyfriend and went across to say hello. Sharokh gave me a smile as he watched her departing back.

"Eleonora knows everyone. I think it's partly because of her sociable nature and partly because all the students know her boyfriend is Fabio, whose father is a multi-millionaire Turin industrialist. Of course Fabio is famous in his own right as probably the best student at the university." I decided not to reply to Sharokh's blatant provocation and took a sip of the water that the waiter had just left on our table. Eva, however, had something to say.

"Don't be so cynical Sharokh. Eleonora is a beautiful girl, much appreciated by many people in her own right." I took a quick look at Eva's face to see if it was registering irony, but it seemed normal enough.

"Oh yes indeed", replied Sharokh enthusiastically. "Eleonora is truly a special person, always ready to help out her friends." He looked at me and continued: "I think you know Luke that it was Eleonora and Fabio who helped us find the apartment in Felino. Some friends of friends had heard about it and they mentioned it to us. We were lucky."

"I shouldn't think that an old place stuck in the middle of Felino would have any great appeal for would-be tenants", I replied. If you two hadn't taken it, I imagine it would still be on the market now." Sharokh shook his head in strong denial.

"Not at all. We were lucky. There was a couple ahead of us, but they couldn't afford to pay the rent for six months in advance. That's when the chance came our way." It was my turn to shake my head now.

"Such a requirement is really crazy. Anyway, I imagine that the other couple simply said that and later got a place in central Parma."

“Oh no”, cut in Eva at this point. “We saw them a short time ago and they told us that they were leaving Parma and travelling to Rome in search of work and cheaper costs. They’ll be gone by now.” I grunted. “Felino is a place for old men and grandmothers. What possible attraction can such a village have for young people?”

“The price, perhaps?” suggested Sharokh with a big smile on his face “The price of apartments is far more expensive in Parma than in Felino. Also, we have lots of room in Felino. For a similarly sized place in Parma I imagine we’d have to pay double.” Eva nodded her head.

“Yes, I’d say that’s about right. The apartment itself is spacious and light.” I shook my head.

“It’s still too far out. I advised you to wait, but you just ignored everyone and went ahead with it.” Eva was silent, while Sharokh frowned. Eleonora had managed to pull her two friends over to our table and while she was introducing us all, she also found time to instruct the waiters about pulling up another table to join ours.

“Luke, Eva and Sharokh; these are two of my good friends from university, Elvira and Tommy.” Tommy seemed like a strange sort of a handle for an Italian, but no doubt his real name, I thought, was Tomasso: he was clearly Italian. Elvira I’d met on several previous occasions. She was pretty enough with her long blonde hair and her eyes of blue—but the sorrow always seemed to be hers! In the last six months I reckoned that she’d been dumped by about three guys. She never really had much of a personality and tended to smother people with her too gushing affection. Even now, as they stood waiting for the waiters to arrange the table, Elvira insisted on wrapping her arms around “Tommy’s”

neck and placing her cheek next to his: actually quite an uncomfortable position to stand in! Tommy looked a little embarrassed as he tried to make polite conversation with us while Elvira hung around his neck like a trophy.

"Tommy's in his last year and will take his final exams in a few months", Eleonora told us, while the uncomfortable Tommy stood with Elvira draped all over him.

"Oh yes", interjected Elvira herself. "And he's so intelligent. His father has a big building company in Milan—and Tommy will be employed as an expert on company law there. Congratulate us—we've been engaged for a week! After Tommy's final exams we'll be getting married." I looked more closely at Elvira's Tommy. He was small in stature, with a big nose and thick lips. His skin had a darker tint than was common for families that hailed from Milan. Possibly a Southern family made good in Milan, I thought.

After the table was arranged to everyone's satisfaction we all got down to the business of ordering food. Three of us had eaten previously and ordered only sandwiches and beer. Eleonora, on the other hand, took an Italianate period of time studying the menu before ordering a standard margherita pizza. The other two had already ordered prior to our arrival. They sat opposite to each other across the newly joined table, but their hands were interlinked in a grasp so strong that the blood circulation was in some danger of being choked off—and already some flecks of blue were to be seen on the skin of their hands.

"How did the two of you meet, Elvira?" I enquired politely. The last time we'd met (a couple of months earlier), she'd been engaged to a policeman.

Elvira seemed to consider carefully for a moment before replying.

"It was at a university disco, just after I'd split up with that wretched *carabiniere*, Daniele. I was feeling really low and a mutual friend introduced me to Tommy inside the disco—and we danced away the evening together! The chemistry was so apparent right from that first evening. Subsequently, however, we discovered that we're also perfectly matched as people: I'm Sagittarius and Tommy is Capricorn." As she spoke, Elvira gave Tommy's hand an affectionate squeeze (almost making the poor boy cry out in pain!)

"I'm so happy for you both," purred Eleonora, slipping easily into her cat persona. "Have you arranged the big day yet?" Elvira shook her head.

"Not yet; obviously, we don't want to rush into anything. If things go smoothly with Tommy's exams, I guess we could get married in the summer. It really doesn't matter. We love each other and marriage is only a formality." Eva and Sharokh had observed all this with some subdued mirth. When their food came, they ate quickly and as soon as the sandwiches were finished, they announced their intention to leave.

"I think we really ought to be going now. Both of us need to wake up early tomorrow morning—and if Sharokh drinks anymore I think he's going to fall asleep at the wheel." Sharokh smiled and shook his head good-humouredly. Nevertheless, he was clearly in full concordance with the idea of leaving. Eva looked at me with serious intent as she and Sharokh rose to their feet.

"Call me before the weekend and we'll arrange to do something. Maybe catch a film and have

dinner afterwards?" Sharokh looked out of the window with a lugubrious expression on his face.

"Yes, of course. I'll do that. I think there are some good movies showing this week. Don't worry, I'll call you." Eva and Sharokh took their leave of Eleonora and Elvira (not forgetting Tommy!) with smiling good humour and departed. By this time, I had also finished my food—but none of the three Italians were more than half-way through their pizzas. Eleonora, however, pushed hers away only half eaten.

"It is enough for me", she declared. "I will not sleep if I eat too much—and I still have work to do." She looked at me with regal intent. "If you've finished, perhaps we should go too?" she suggested, never doubting an acquiescent response. Personally, I found the presence of Elvira and Tommy a little irksome and I was more than glad to have the opportunity to get away. Consequently, I nodded my head in full agreement. Elvira looked disappointed.

"Oh do stay a little longer. I have so many things I'd like to talk with you about." But Eleonora was adamant and shook her head.

"No, sorry Elvira. I really must be getting off. I have so much to do—and I am so tired after working all day. We'll see each other again soon. Congratulations on your engagement—and call me any time; you have my number." The two Italian girls embraced and I shook hands with Tommy. Completing the formalities, I pecked Elvira on the cheek and Tommy kissed Eleonora. Finally (after paying), we left the two of them finishing off their pizzas and the wine. We walked over to the staircase and descended. On the ground floor, the diners had thinned out and only a few tables were

still occupied. The waiters smiled at us as we made our way to the exit and the owner—a tall thin man with a pencil moustache—wished us a friendly good night.

“Good night. We hope to see you here, dining with us again, very soon.” I nodded at him and Eleonora smiled her usual royal smile. At the door we paused a moment to look outside. It wasn’t snowing and even the snow on the ground seemed less thick than before. It would still be cold, but we were both wearing thick overcoats. We wished the waiters a last goodbye before venturing out into the still night. Outside the pizzeria all was silent. No one was in sight as we turned left and began walking towards the deserted Via Mazzini.

Slowly, but inevitably, like two cats from the same litter, we pressed against each other and I took hold of her hand. Conversation was no longer necessary. Most of what had been said this night, had been for the benefit of others. Eleonora and I were linked in some profound and fundamental way; beyond the petty happenings of mundane existence where people might like each other for a while and then go their different ways. Even the first time we’d met, both of us had known that something special, an important event, had taken place. Since then, not everything had been perfect between us—far from it! However, the basic reality of our mutual connection had never been questioned by either of us. It was simply something given, something real, something unalterable and as certain as the stars in the night sky above us: mysterious, but undoubtedly true like an accurately cast horoscope.

Without seeing a single person abroad, we reached the flight of descending steps that led off the main thoroughfare and down to the entrance of

Eleonora's apartment, hidden deep in the darkness below. The ancient concrete steps were next to the bar where I'd stopped to reconnoitre earlier that evening and opposite to the office where Eleonora worked. Now, everything was dark and still. Not even a single car passed along the usually busy Via Mazzini. No doubt the hour was late, it was midweek and the weather was bad. Nevertheless, it seemed to me as if this moment had been granted to us by the spirit of the environment to be our own.

I gathered the beautiful red-haired girl close to me and we kissed in a frantic embrace that appeared to be without beginning or end as time seemed to stand still and only this present moment of ecstatic union existed. One kiss became many, but the embrace—that one, unique embrace—remained tight and enduring. At last, exhausted, I pulled away in the direction of the bridge that arched over Parma's furiously rushing torrent. Eleonora's strong and clear voice followed my desperate retreat with a stark but lucid precision.

"Call me in a couple of days. I need a couple of days."

Chapter 3

A VISIT TO LIA

I passed over the bridge in a pleasant daze and decided to visit Lia. I knew that she mostly painted through the night and would give me a whole-hearted welcome. The last scene with Eleonora had been pleasing and yet “the giving had famished the craving”. Now, I would plunge even deeper into this tenebrous night and extract every delight it was willing to offer me. I thought of Eleonora sat with Fabio, pouring over books and drinking coffee while the television murmured in the background—and I smiled. Lia lived in a big first floor apartment in a block of houses that ran along the river side. It took me only a few minutes to reach the spot. There, I stopped and picked out the brass nameplate I was looking for: Lia Bruglione. I rang the bell for a full ten seconds before there was any response.

Si? Chi e’?

Sono io, cara—Luke.

Va bene...vieni su The big heavy door jerked open and I stepped inside. All the lights had come on when Lia had opened the door, so I had no problem in making my way up to the first floor landing. There in front of me, on the left, was the black painted door of Lia’s apartment. Even as I looked at it, the door swung open and there, in the dimly lit doorway, stood Lia making a “hush” motion to me with her fingers to her lips. I quickly walked

down the corridor and passed into the big apartment as Lia made space for me to pass. She silently closed the door behind us.

Inside, the apartment was huge. The left side was used for living quarters, but the right side had been converted into an artist's studio. It was here that Lia passed most of her nights, creating those Klimt inspired canvasses that had already made her famous in Parma and noted in Italy at large. Lia had inherited quite a large fortune from her father who had been a minor nobleman in Parma and she lived her life in some opulence. As far as I knew, she did nothing beyond paint, hold exhibitions of her painting (which she financed herself) and make love with the most discerning taste.

Lia was a well-built woman of about thirty-one or two. Perhaps she was not conventionally beautiful, but her *sguardo* or glance was filled with sexual provocation. Lia's figure was on the fulsome side, but she certainly wasn't fat. Her breasts were largely voluptuous, but her waist was thin. Tonight, she was wearing a white house coat and her long black hair fell loose about her face and shoulders. The smell of oil paints was in the air and it was clear she'd been working until I had come along and disturbed her.

"Are you working on something important?" I enquired, looking towards the entrance of her studio on the right. She smiled and beckoned me forward towards the studio.

"Of course. As always. Come and take a look and tell me if it's any good or not." I followed her through into the studio which was brightly lit. In the middle of the room a large canvas reposed on a strong wooden easel, facing the doorway. It portrayed this very street, the street where Lia lived, on a rainy day. All the characters were bustling

about their business in a kind of impressionistic haze where the muted faces seemed to blend with the falling rain itself. However, the focus of attention was on the myriad umbrellas that the people were carrying: some were being blown inside out, but all were colourful and striking and made a marked contrast with the general gloominess of the weather and the people. It seemed to be just about finished.

"I like it", I told her honestly enough. I knew Lia to be a fine artist, if sometimes just a little derivative. To my eyes, untrained as they were, this seemed more original than usual. Lia seemed pleased by what I'd said.

"I'm glad you like it. I've been working on it pretty continuously for the last week and I do believe that I've managed to capture something unusual there. Let's go back into the salon and have something to drink." Lia turned off the lights in the studio and I followed her out of the room. When we were sitting comfortably by the fire, Lia asked me whether I'd like a hot drink or something alcoholic.

"Something with fire in it would go down well", I responded with some feeling. "Outside, the weather is freezing." Nevertheless, here in Lia's own little world, the temperature was pleasant and was even beginning to make me feel drowsy. For a moment, Lia absented herself from the main reception room, but after a moment she returned with two large glasses of brandy.

"Here, drink this", she instructed, setting the two drinks down on the small table in front of us. After, taking her seat and sipping her brandy once or twice, she leaned back in the chair and eyed me astutely. "So to what do I owe the honour of your presence tonight? Are you lonely?" Lia never asked

the question with any irony in her voice. It was a straight question that demanded a straight answer.

"I suppose I am a little", I replied reservedly, determined not to give too much away. My own feelings were far too confused about everything to do anything other than respond to direct questions with reserve and as obliquely as possible.

"Is it Eleonora again? You had a bad night?" she probed. I shook my head.

"No, not really. It was quite good actually—better than usual. However, there is always the same dead-end. We have a relationship that doesn't work and isn't leading anywhere—yet neither of us are strong enough to put an end to it." Lia was silent for a few seconds. After a moment, she took another sip of brandy and the house coat she was wearing slipped down a little revealing her large and shapely breasts. She did nothing to cover them up again. Eventually she spoke.

"I can give you no real advice about that. Some people believe that destiny is involved in such affairs. If that is so, then there is nothing anyone can do and you must simply see the situation out to its eventual end—whatever that may be. On the other hand, other, equally intelligent people, take the view that our fate lies in our own hands. Personally, I agree with this latter group. If you want to mope your life away over some star crossed mutual attraction then of course you may. However, life will continue around you in all its gaiety while you miss the opportunities on offer. Eventually, who knows how it might all end? In suicide perhaps? In murder? Perhaps in a lunatic asylum or a prison? Much better to shake yourself out of this defeatist mind-set. Your whole life still lies ahead of you and you may either take the right hand way to melodramatic self-

destruction or the left hand path to probable happiness and contentment. The choice is yours.” I had been listening to Lia with the resentment of a man who has carried a burden for so long that he is reluctant to relinquish it. At last, I slowly answered.

“Well, you may be right Lia. I am undoubtedly caught in a strange psychological trap. Did you ever hear the story of Indra and the pigs? No...? Well, I’m not surprised. One day Indra—the King of the Hindu gods—decided to become a pig just to see what it was like. However, after a while, he forgot about his previous life and began to enjoy his pig life with his pig family—wife and children. The other gods were in quite a state and didn’t know what to do. Finally, one suggested that they should kill all the pigs and free the soul of Indra from its present drudgery. In fact this is exactly what they did and Indra was released from his pig-life; but the interesting point, is the fact he told the other gods that he had wanted to continue as a pig for as long as he’d been inside the pig body. Of course, the moral is that we cannot wish ourselves out of the life we are living. Perhaps it would be better to take another path—but some primitive genetic code keeps us battling against futility when it would really be better to stop.” I slumped into silence after having said these words. I was very tired and I’d drunk too much this night. Lia for her part, seemed to be on the point of responding to my rather absurd analogy when she thought better of it and stopped herself. She rose and left the room. I heard her moving around in one of the bedrooms. After a moment she returned and announced that all was ready.

“Come to bed, Luke. It is very late and you are tired. I would, however, ask you to take a shower first. This will refresh you and, at least in part, take

away any anguish this night may have caused you. There are towels in the bathroom. Come to me when you are ready.” With these words Lia left the salon and disappeared into the bedroom she’d prepared. I sat in my chair for some moments, letting the events of the evening pass through my mind. They were a mess! The whole situation was just a big *casino* and only the application of a lot of courage and self-control could ever change it. Anyway, as Lia had said I was tired. Best to leave such thoughts until another day. Right now, a beautiful and intelligent creature was waiting in the next room for me to come to her. I knew that she could soothe the pain I was feeling: that she wanted to do this for me and would ask for nothing except sincere love-making in return.

Slowly, I rose from the chair in which I was sitting and went across to the bathroom. It took me about fifteen minutes to complete a shower and, after leaving the bathroom, I left my clothes over a chair in the salon. I opened the door to Lia’s bedroom and slowly entered dressed only in my underpants. Inside, a small lamp near the bed still burned with a little insipid light. Lia herself was lying on her side looking away from me. It seemed as if she was sleeping lightly. She was wearing nothing except a red bra—and I knew from previous experience that below the sheets, her nether regions were covered only with the skimpiest of red panties. As I came closer to the bed she rolled over and pushed herself up on her elbow, a welcoming smile on her face.

“What kept you so long? I nearly fell asleep.”

“The water felt good”, I replied truthfully. Right now, I’m feeling a lot more relaxed than I did half-an-hour ago.” Eva’s smile broadened.

"I told you a shower would do you good. You should think about listening to my advice more often!" I nodded my head.

"You are right Lia. Everything you say and do is good for me. Sometimes, I am just too stupid to understand."

I got into the bed next to her and gave her a sloppy kiss full on the lips. After that I took full pleasure in feeling her full breasts, controlled and contained within the red bra. Her long black hair fell over my face as I felt the sublime circumference of her breasts and I took a handful of it in my left hand; my right hand continued with the rhythmic pressure on her tightly bra-contained breasts. I heard her give a little moan of pleasure as I began to cover her naked body in a series of little kisses, though she instinctively grabbed hold of my hair and pulled my head back. I relaxed a little and began kissing her on the face and head: Lia responded with many kisses of her own.

I felt the time had now come to remove the bra, so I slipped my hands behind her back and unfastened the hooks; gently, I pulled the bright red bra away and tossed it on the floor. Her large breasts slipped easily free and I nestled my head on them. The sudden desire came on me to suck on Lia's nipples, but I dismissed the idea as some kind of undesirable mother obsession. Instead, I continued massaging her breasts and eventually fell to covering them in a hundred tiny kisses.

By this time my penis was thick and hard and Lia began massaging it inside my pants. I felt her pubic area with my hand and was glad to discover that she hadn't shaved for some time. On occasions, Lia liked to shave her pubic hair, but it wasn't really to my taste. Now, I could feel quite a virgin bush

beneath my exploring hand. Quickly I found the lips of her vagina and felt her hot pussy on my fingers; there was no resistance and my finger sank right in. I kicked off my underpants and pulled her to me, dragging down her panties in almost the same movement; I set her over me and let the fully erect penis swing in front of her. Lia carefully inserted the monolith into her vagina and began to move rhythmically over me. After a while, her movements became ever more frenetic; she gasped and moaned as her orgasm neared. Eventually she came with a shudder of pleasure through her whole body. I felt her go limp and slide off me over to the side.

Although I had enjoyed our intercourse, I was still erect after Lia's orgasm and after a moment or two she fell to masturbating me. For a while, I thought I would never come but eventually something moved in my mind and shivered down through my whole body. Lia caught most of the hot liquid in her open hands, though much of it went over her body. The Italian girl massaged the life juice into her own skin and mine. After a moment, the wetness had gone and, exhausted, we held each other close for about half an hour. Eventually the need to urinate, which often came to me after orgasm, forced me out of the bed and into the bathroom again. After urinating I decided to take a shower and returned to bed about fifteen minutes later. Lia lay on her side, away from me, but as I climbed back into the bed she spoke.

"Why is it always so difficult to make you come? The erection arrives easily enough, but after that it is a devil of a job for you to reach orgasm. Am I not attractive to you?" I shook my head. "You are beautiful Lia and extremely attractive to all men. This

kind of priapism from which I'm suffering will be due only to the devils in my head."

"And not to Eleonora? Are you sure that the real problem isn't that you only really want to have sex with her?" There was a kind of accusation in her voice that surprised me as ours had always been a casual affair. Now it seemed she wanted to psychoanalyse me.

"Lia, don't say that. Eleonora is not the only beautiful woman in the world. I certainly have no intention of playing the game of broken-hearted lover. You are a truly special woman and while it may be true that this business with Eleonora has made me somewhat sad and listless, it is mostly through your help, through your friendship, that I have found the inner strength to keep a sense of perspective about my life." Lia smiled and gave me a full kiss on the lips.

"Perhaps you are lying, but sometimes lies are more welcome than the truth." Was I lying, I asked myself? It was true that Lia had helped me a lot but did sex with Lia compensate for the absence of Eleonora? Right now, Eleonora was just down the road, a twenty minute walk away, possibly sleeping with Fabio. Did that bother me? I knew they had separate rooms in the apartment they shared together and that they were supposed to be essentially study partners: but surely they slept together on occasions? In fact, I knew they did; even though the relationship was undoubtedly a contingent one. For the thousandth time I asked myself what possible future there could be for a relationship between Eleonora and I. I didn't fit into the bourgeois boudoir nor was she some revolutionary Krupskaya to my Lenin. Yet there was something heroic in her nature: she was a lion of a

woman who could never find a man to match her. Amongst her own type, it was very easy for her to observe the deficiencies of the men who loved her. They were mostly spoilt rich kids with little backbone of their own. Only outside this anaemic world might she find someone worthy to receive her love. Her tragedy, however, was that she too belonged to the same world—however much she may despise it.

I lay next to Lia in a comfortable doze, between sleep and wakefulness, for about another hour. Finally I decided it was time to be leaving. I usually left Lia before the dawn came, though this was more by my choice than by Lia's. I slipped out of the bed and into the salon where my clothes were still draped over a chair. After dressing, I made myself a coffee as I often did before leaving Lia's house in the pre-dawn hours. Lia herself was now fast asleep and I could hear her steady breathing even from the salon where I was sat drinking my morning coffee. It often worked out like this. We would talk for a while, have sex and then sleep. Finally, I would get up, drink a coffee and leave the house while Lia continued sleeping.

Was she really a great artist, I suddenly wondered? Somehow I doubted it. Everything in one sense had come too easily to Lia and one didn't observe any signs of real struggle in her work. The energy of survival was lacking—though of course she had survived. My theory was that true art emerged mostly from chaos and suffering: everybody suffered, but not everyone—and certainly not Lia—was ready to face the chaos. Having finished my coffee, I rose to go. First, I looked quietly into the bedroom to see if Lia was awake, but as always at this hour she was sleeping deeply. Her long dark hair covered the pillow like a black storm

and the wish to go to her again came upon me. However, I controlled this emotion—though not without some difficulty—and closed the bedroom door quietly. I walked across the still dark salon and slowly opened the apartment door. Outside everything was pitch black and it could have still been the middle of the night (though I sensed that dawn was not far off). I switched on the outside light with a click, walked across the landing and began to descend the staircase. A few minutes later I was standing outside Lia's apartment block looking up and down the road. Nothing and no one were to be seen. For the first time in many hours I glanced at my wrist watch. It was just half-past-five.

I retraced my steps along the fast rushing torrent of Parma until I came out near to the bridge again. One or two early morning cars were passing slowly along the road and I could see the light of at least one early morning cafe shining through the darkness. Although I had drunk the coffee at Lia's I still felt some rumblings of early morning appetite and decided to stop at the anonymous little coffee house to drink a cappuccino and eat a brioche. Inside, the cafe was totally deserted and the barman seemed surprised to see a customer at such an early hour. I guessed that he had probably only just pulled up the shutters. He stopped wiping the tables and came over to the counter in order to serve me.

Si signore. Che cosa volete?

Prendo un cappuccino e una brioche colla crema I told him looking carefully at the cream cakes behind the counter. Some of these small shops would keep the cakes for more than twenty-four hours. However, the brioche looked freshly made today. It took me only about a minute to drink the cappuccino and eat the brioche. After finishing, I

thanked the barman and left the cafe. Outside, the weather was still very cold and the snow on the ground was beginning to turn to hazardous ice. I turned the corner into the street where my apartment lay, passing the old church of San Antonio on my left. Even the monks were still sleeping at this hour. It had been a long night and I was feeling sleepy as I neared my home. Only a few cats and dogs were to be seen along the road as I neared my apartment block.

Just a moment later I was outside my door and turning the key in the lock. As I stepped inside, I saw that the corridor light was already lit—and I could hear someone descending the stairs. After a few seconds, the son who I had heard arguing with his father the night before bustled into view. He was all wrapped up in a great jacket and scarf, while in his hand he carried a black umbrella. He muttered a greeting in haste before hurrying past me and out into the street; the front door crashed behind his disappearing back. I slowly walked up to my apartment and let myself in. Once inside, I turned up the central heating before undressing and throwing myself onto the bed.

PART TWO

Chapter 4

CIRCE'S ISLAND

We had been forced onto a tree lined shore by heavy winds and I had sent Mario and Sharokh off to see whether they could discover any signs of life on this apparently desolate island. Myself and the other men had made a camp fire not too far from the shore and waited for news. Harold Verity was talking about Serena as usual and whining about how much he missed her and their cosy cheese and wine parties. Several of the men told him to shut up and he lapsed into the heavy silence of a misunderstood man.

Just as we were about to give up hope of ever seeing Mario again he returned through the trees and related the most incredible story to us. The island was under the control of a beautiful sorceress called Circe. She was the possessor of a great castle that stood on a craggy hill about an hour's walk from where we camped. Mario and Sharokh had both climbed the mountain and at the summit, Circe herself had been waiting for them. Mario described her as being imperiously beautiful with flowing red hair and perfect features. Circe spoke to the two men with kindness and sympathy and asked them to come inside her castle to rest and dine. However, once the two of them were inside the castle, Circe put a spell on Sharokh and turned him

into a fat pig. She was about to do the same to Mario when suddenly she had thought better of it.

"Did the two of you come alone or are there others?" she demanded of Mario in a voice that insisted on hearing only the truth. Mario was frightened, but managed to stutter out the basic facts. We were a company of Greek soldiers on our way home from the Trojan War. Unfortunately, Poseidon had become angered with the captain, Giovanni, and this had led to our ship running aground on the shores of this island during a most terrible storm. We asked only for provisions and the time to repair our boat before being on our way. On hearing this information, Circe had become curious and sent Mario back with a message.

"Tell your captain to come and see me alone. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement whereby I can help you. Your friend will stay with me as a hostage. Go!" Mario had wasted no time in getting back and now I pondered his words and tried to decide whether I should take the risk of going to see Circe. After only a brief moment of reflection, I made my decision.

"Men, I will go alone to see this enchantress Circe—even as she requests. It is probable that she can help us with information about the geography of this area and her provisions would certainly be welcome." Howard Verity shook his head.

"Are you sure that you aren't just playing the part of a romantic hero Luca? Simply making a gesture in order to escape the 'ennui' of bourgeois life?" How well this man knew me I reflected, but my words displayed nothing of what was in my heart.

"An opportunity has arisen that we cannot afford to ignore. I will set off immediately. The rest of you will wait here for my return. If I am not back within

twenty-four hours then follow my tracks and find out what has happened.” Mario looked concerned and couldn’t stop himself from making a comment.

“But what if she turns you into a pig too?” I smiled at Mario with the greatest unconcern.

“That is not likely, Mario. Have you forgotten that I am permanently under the protection of the Goddess Athena, great daughter of Zeus?” A look of understanding flashed into Mario’s eyes. “Of course; I had forgotten.” Howard Verity merely sneered.

“Get your end away with her too did you Luca? I am still uncomfortable about that night you spent with myself and Serena in the mountains.” Ignoring Howard, I turned and walked in the direction from which Mario had come. His directions as to the location of Circe’s castle had been comprehensive and I felt no fear of missing it. My only concern was to return my ship and my men safely home to Ithaca—and although Mario’s description of Circe had reminded me of Eleonora herself, my intentions were strictly altruistic.

It took me about an hour to find Circe’s castle which was perched on the mountaintop Mario had described. As I looked up at the great towers I wondered how I might avoid the fate of my two men. Obviously, Circe knew of any intruder’s approach. At that moment, Athena herself appeared to me dressed in a flowing white gown, golden hair tumbling about her shoulders. She bent over and picked up some herbs from the ground.

“Eat these, Luca and you will be protected from all of Circe’s magic. After that, she will take you to her bed and you will learn many useful things that will help you in your onward voyage.” Having said these words, Zeus’ daughter disappeared from my sight and I walked across to the point where she’d

been standing. On the ground were the herbs she had held. I examined them closely and discovered them to be a root plant, blackish in colour. Without even a second thought, I put them in my mouth and swallowed them: a feeling of sleepy well-being immediately followed and for a moment I thought I would have to close my eyes. However, the sleepiness quickly passed leaving me totally refreshed as after long sleep. Now I was ready to climb up to the castle.

The incline was not particularly steep and it didn't take me long to reach the top. As I'd expected, Circe herself was waiting for me at the summit. She was even more beautiful than Mario had described. In particular, the long red hair that blew freely in the wind struck me as wildly provocative, seeming to curl and jump with a life of its own. However, everything about Circe was special. Her features were bold and symmetrical while her body, which was wrapped in a loose red toga, showed generous curves in all the right places.

Circe smiled at me and invited me to accompany her inside the castle where we could eat and rest. Of course, this was exactly the same story she had told to Mario and Sharokh and if not for the previous intervention of the Goddess Athena, I would have been feeling ill-at-ease. However, confident that the black root plants would counteract the sorceress' magic powers, I followed her into the castle without a qualm. Once inside, Circe turned to me and muttered some words, arms splaying out in all directions. To her obvious surprise nothing happened. After a moment of indecision she tried again, repeating the same words only with more force. Once again nothing happened. By this time,

surprise had turned to resignation and the enchantress spoke to me with humble words.

“You are surely beloved by one of the great Gods of Olympus—perhaps even by Zeus himself. My magic cannot affect you. I pray you to come and dine with me and tell me more about yourself and the reasons for why you are here. For my part, if there is anything I can do to help you recover your strength or to provide you with provisions for your next voyage, then you can rely upon me to fulfill those tasks with the same enthusiasm I would reserve for the completion of a sacred duty.” I followed Circe into a great banquet hall where a table was already laid out with delicious looking food and wine. As we sat down opposite each other, I heard an oinking sound in the background and looked around to see a pig walking freely about the room.

“Is that my man Sharokh?”, I asked calmly. “The one you turned into a pig?” Circe nodded her head.

“Yes. Allow me to change him back before we start.” The sorceress muttered some strange incantation and waved her arms. There was a puff of smoke and suddenly Sharokh was standing where the pig had been with a look of bewilderment on his face. Circe clapped her hands and two great ebony black guards came and led the still dazed Sharokh out of the room. Circe gave me a serious look.

“Do not fear for your man. He will be well entertained by one of my ladies-in-waiting. Now let us relax and eat.”

I ate very well, though Circe hardly seemed to touch her own food. After we had finished, the enchantress took me into her bedroom where we made love. She reached her orgasm before I did

and it was only after some special hands on attention that I achieved the same satisfaction.

Athena had told me that this woman had special knowledge and could tell me how to get home. Therefore, as we lay next to each other, after our love making, I decided to broach the subject. "Circe, as you have guessed, the Goddess Athena is my protector. She intimated to me that you could give some important information about the best way for me to travel home. Is this true?" Circe sighed before speaking.

"There is a blind *operaio*, Sceriffias, who can tell you all you want to know. Shall I bring him before us? He is dead and resides with Hades in the valley of the Styx. My power can bring him here. Shall I do this now?" I nodded my confirmation. Circe began muttering in those strange syllables I'd heard before and her eyes rolled wildly about the sockets in her head. Suddenly I perceived that everything was going dark and a flickering light was growing at the centre of the blackness. At length, Sceriffias stepped out of the darkness and spoke.

"Hail great Luca, destroyer of relationships. I have spoken with that group of students who saw you in the bar in Via Mazzini and they tell me that you ate your *panino* like a pig or an English dog. Eleonora is far too classy for someone like you." I regarded Sceriffias with a quizzical look.

"This is merely the opinion of a few Italian fops Sceriffias. Let's get to the point. How can I get home from here?" Sceriffias shook his head doubtfully.

"I'm afraid it's not going to be easy. First you need to pass the island of the Sirens whose beautiful song has lured many a mariner to his death. If you succeed in navigating that peril, you will come to the island of Calypso who will wish to take

you as her lover for all eternity. Finally, if you can escape from that delicate situation you will eventually reach Ithaca only to find that your beloved Eleonora has been besieged by an army of suitors each of whom wishes to take her as his wife."

"But you can help me?", I insisted. Sceriffias reflected for a moment.

"Well, as you know it's all really up to Poseidon, Athena and Zeus. If Athena loves you more than Poseidon hates you then you could make it—always assuming that Zeus remains neutral. However, be sure that a thousand difficulties will dog your every step. I'm afraid you've put a lot of noses out of joint, Luca and it's not going to be easy to fix them again in the time frame that we're talking about." Suddenly Sceriffias began to fade before my eyes, the light returned, and I was once more alone in bed with Circe. She was looking at me quizzically and began to stroke my face.

"Did you discover the things you needed to know from Sceriffias?" she enquired.

"You witnessed everything", I replied, a little nonplussed by her question. Circe shook her head.

"No, Luca. My magic brought him here, but I was not permitted to listen in on your conversation. What did he say?" I thought about it for a moment.

"Little of any real practical use", I replied. "He said that if I survived it would mean that Athena loved me more than Poseidon hated me. However, he assured me that if I did make it back to Ithaca it would only be after many tragic incidents." For a moment Circe said nothing. Eventually, however, her beautiful face smiled its approval on me.

"Not so bad then. Love always defeats hatred." I wasn't so sure about this, but said nothing. We made exquisite love one more time—and then I

informed Circe that I had to leave the island. With sad resignation, she acquiesced to this and a bewildered Sharokh was summoned to join me.

With many thanks to the divine Queen Circe, we left that place, Sharokh still in a daze, and made our way quickly back to the strip of beach where our ship had been left. The others were overjoyed to see us, having feared the worst after our long absence. I ordered a party of ten men to travel to Circe's palace for provisions while the rest of us set about making repairs to our battered boat. After several hours the men returned, laden with skins of wine, water, cheese, bread, salted meat and many other items. By this time, our boat was ready to recommence the journey and everything seemed in place for the next stage of our voyage. However, Sharokh decided that we should not leave the island without first making a sacrifice of propitiation to Poseidon and the other Gods (and after some thought, Mario agreed with him).

"You are right, Sharokh. Who knows what terrible dangers might face us before we reach the blessed shores of Ithaca? Certainly we must not neglect our duty to the immortal Gods." Most of the other men, agreed with Mario and Sharokh—until Howard Verity expressed his scepticism.

"Excuse me, but what is the point of wasting our scarce provisions on a sacrifice to Gods who are merely figments of our imagination? We may be desperate for food and drink before we are safely back in Ithaca. I say that if Mario and Sharokh want to make an offering to the Gods, they should be the ones to sacrifice their share of the provisions. Such nonsense has nothing to do with anyone else." The other men, on hearing Verity's argument, changed their minds and decided not to make a sacrifice.

Mario and Sharokh, however, were resolute and went through with the sacrifice—even though the meat and wine they offered would be deducted from their share of the provisions. After they had finished, we left the island of Circe behind us and headed into the vast expanse of open sea.

Chapter 5

THE SIRENS

Circe had informed me that the next test I needed to overcome would be that of the Sirens who sang to passing mariners from the craggy rocks of a narrow passage; their song was so beautiful that the mariners would inevitably steer their ships onto the jagged rocks, lost in contemplation of the divine melody, and be drowned beneath the waves. I decided that there was a way I would be able to listen to the Sirens' song and yet live to tell the tale: I instructed my men to bind me tightly to the mast of our ship and not to pay any attention to my cries as we passed. I also told my mariners to fill their own ears with beeswax so they couldn't hear the song of the Sirens themselves. A day after our escape from Circe's island, we came to the craggy domain of the Sirens and even as we approached their abode, I could faintly hear the tones of a melody that was so beautiful it immediately brought salt tears to my eyes. The Sirens were calling to me:

"Come. Come. Come... the world is nothingness... let us soothe away your earthly pains with our divine singing". I strained to be free of the ropes that bound me to the mast and as soon as I understood the hopelessness of this task, I begged my men to set me free. However, the mariners continued with their rowing, eyes fixed upon their feet: they didn't even hear my cries of appeal! As we

passed the place where the singing was at its loudest, I looked across at the rocky crags—and there I saw a quite amazing sight. A woman who from the waist down had the tail of a fish instead of legs clung to a jagged rock and filled the air with beautiful music; she was, in common parlance, a mermaid. However, the thing that struck me most about this fantastic creature was that her face and bare breasts were already well known to me. It was Eva, the German girl, who was calling me to her with her exquisite song, attempting to shipwreck me on the treacherous rocks. Her skin seemed a little browner than usual and certainly her breasts were larger than I remembered them. Her hair too was long and Medusa like, stretching out its tendrils towards me on the wind. And all the while, the hypnotic song continued.

“Luca, Come to me, Come. Eleonora is a bitch: I can make you happy; Come to me, Come. Sharokh is not the man I want to live with in perpetuity. Look at him toiling at the oars, ears filled with beeswax. Do you think I could ever be happy with such a man? It’s you I love Captain Luca: Come to me now dearest, Come.”

I would have given anything to snap my bonds and be with dear little Eva, but though I groaned in protest and ordered my men under pain of death to let me go free, no one could hear me and my men’s oars continued to pull the boat through that enchanted channel.

Eva could see that I was unable to get free and a long coil of her hair wrapped itself around the mast and threatened to snap it in two as she attempted to impede our onward progress. Sharokh, who was one of the nearest crew members to the spot where I stood straining against my bonds, looked up from

his oar and understood that the mast was about to snap; he jumped to his feet, unsheathing his sword in the same movement. Without a moment's hesitation, he hacked at the thick tendril of hair that was holding us fast and succeeded in cutting it free. Eva gave a gasp of pain and I noticed that her breasts seemed to grow a little smaller. The piece of hacked off hair floated away on the waves and Eva took out a mirror in order to study herself closely. Next, she took out a hair brush and began to brush her hair in great flowing backward movements in order to hide her recent mutilation. Sharokh was unable to control himself any longer and tore out the ear plugs, throwing them overboard. After that, he flung himself into the sea and began to swim desperately towards Eva. I knew that he was a lost soul—and this was confirmed when the thick tendrils of hair wrapped around his throat and choked the life out of his body—Eva smiling all the while. At last, when Sharokh had been thoroughly choked and drowned, Eva drew him in towards the rock where she lay and extended his dead body out before her. Strangely, I thought I saw a tear fall from her eye on to the dead mariner's body.

Now the ship had moved past the first cluster of rocks and began to approach the second. Here, I could make out two shapes. The first seemed well-known to me with its long straight hair of a murky brown colour and thick black glasses. As before, the bottom half was that of a fish. After a moment or two, I realised it was Ilaria, Mario's *fidanzata*. Next to her on the big rock was the girl from the *gelateria*, her black hair billowing in the wind. Like Eva and Ilaria, she also possessed the form of a mermaid. Once again the inexpressible melody carried across the short distance which separated us and made me

squirm in my bonds. I noted that the two Sirens appeared to be in competition as the songs they sung were different—though both equally alluring. Moreover, I noticed that occasionally they looked at each other with hate filled eyes. Immediately I understood that they were singing for Mario and not for me. If somehow I could open up his ears, the unbearable beauty of their songs would cease.

Mario, like Sharokh before him, was sat very near to me with his eyes upon his oar and I managed to give him a hefty kick in the side. He jumped and looked up at me questioningly. I motioned with my head and eyes to the two women or mermaids who sat singing on the rock.

Immediately Mario saw Ilaria and the girl from the *gelateria* he jumped to his feet and tore out the ear plugs of beeswax. After that, he plunged into the wine red sea and began to swim towards the watery crag. At the moment he reached the rock, the two women grasped him by the arms and with unexpected power, thrust his head under the water. They kept him there, motionless, for several minutes. By the time, they finally drew Mario out of the water, it was clear that his soul had already departed to Hades. They stretched him out on the rock and began to weep disconsolately. Their singing had finally stopped.

With the loss of only these two men, our ship sallied out from the region of the Sirens. When we were well clear my mariners released me from my bonds and extracted the plugs from their ears; next they began to happily congratulate their captain and each other on yet another narrow escape. For some moments we celebrated by drinking wine from animal skins and the ship floated at peace on the

blue carpet of Poseidon's earthly ocean. We were safe and content.

It was in that very moment of happiness, after our escape from the Sirens, that Poseidon decided our fate. Suddenly a great storm gathered and blackened the sky. A whirlpool of swirling water formed just in front of us—and there was nothing we could do to stop our ship from slowly drifting towards it. With every passing second the whirlpool grew both in size and in ferocity, until we seemed to be slowly travelling to the edge of the world—and below us was the swirling mass of the unknown. The ship reached the lip of the whirlpool and plunged into the abyss, men screaming and plummeting head first into that living black hole. Time stood still as we took that mighty plunge and the ship that had borne us through all our adventures was smashed into a thousand tiny pieces.

The next I knew, I was swimming all alone in a calm sea. Thoroughly exhausted I looked around in the hope of seeing some sign of my mariners or ship, but there was nothing. All had perished in that mighty storm and I was the only survivor of all the men of Ithaca who had journeyed with Agamemnon to the city of Ilium. My eyes filled with tears at that thought and I was also ready to let my life slip away in this forsaken spot when the great Goddess Athena whispered in my ear and told me to look ahead. I followed her instructions and after I had cleared the salt sea from my weary eyes, I was able to perceive, about half-a-mile further on, the tree-lined shore of a small island.

With renewed hope in my heart, I began to swim for the refuge that lay ahead of me. I swam for what seemed an eternity and still the shore seemed far

away. At length, consciousness left me and my senses drifted away.

Chapter 6

CALYPSO

When I woke, I thought I had died and gone to Elysium, the land of the blessed. Two beautiful ladies were gently massaging my body all over and I felt a great sense of peaceful contentment. When they saw that I was again conscious they smiled and, with each of the ladies holding one of my arms, they took me up into the air and we flew at a brisk pace over that forest and mountain covered island. Although my life depended on their care and strength, I felt no fear as we soared over the earth. Still, I was sure that this was Elysium and that these ladies were conducting me to the other blessed souls. After a period of time that was difficult to compute, we flew over a series of wonderfully shaped caves; a grotto in a lagoon of blue. Here the ladies circled round for a moment before lightly descending on the smooth rock. As we were dropping to the earth I noticed that a beautiful woman was waiting for us below. And suddenly I knew her! It was the Calypso of the Appenine way: Eleonora herself!

We landed in the beautiful grotto of Calypso, the sea nymph—and it was Eleonora that stood smiling before me. I tried to say a few words, but my throat was dry with exhaustion. Eleonora raised her hand as a signal that I should not attempt to speak, but listen to what she had to say.

"Luca, you have travelled far from your home and you have been rewarded for your intrepid spirit. Here you are on my island, the island of Calypso, a hero who has been chosen by the Gods of Olympus for a lifetime of pleasure and love with myself, Calypso, as your eternal paramour. Are you happy to hear this?" I shook my head in a gesture of disbelief.

"Great Calypso, noble Queen...you see me before you now ragged and confused. Just moments ago my ship and all my comrades were lost. I, on the other hand, have been saved by your beautiful handmaidens and brought before your Queenly presence. Forgive me if it should take a moment for all this to register in my poor shipwrecked head! Furthermore, your face and outer lineaments are those of my own dear Eleonora who waits for me in Ithaca. How can this be? You are the great Goddess Calypso and not Eleonora. I beg you to explain to me the reasons for these contradictions." Calypso smiled.

"Bold Luca, I appear to you in the most appropriate form. For you Eleonora is the epitome of womanly beauty: therefore, I shall be Eleonora forever more and we shall make love here in my grotto for all eternity. You are blessed by the Olympian Gods and they would have you enjoy yourself. Ask not to see me in my real form for I have none. I am a nymph of the woods, the streams and the air: a pure feminine spirit who has now become whole for you." I pondered Calypso's words for a moment before replying.

"Great Queen of beauty, I am blessed in my fortunes indeed to have won for myself such a prize. But what of the real Eleonora who waits for me in Ithaca? Is it her eternal destiny to be perpetually

disappointed in her long trial of endurance? Surely, it would be wrong of me to remain here with you and forget my great responsibilities to her who spins and waits?" Calypso took me by the hand and smiled.

"Luca, you are thinking too precisely on the event. I am Eleonora and she is me. Believe me, it is not her destiny to suffer the misery of barren waiting and of old age. She is me and I am her and what we both demand is eternal infatuation and love. Love me forever and you are loving her. We are one and you, conjoined with us, are also part of that oneness. Put Ithaca out of your head and remain here with me for always." I tried to understand Calypso's words: she stood before me, perfect in her beauty, both Eleonora and not Eleonora.

"Calypso...Eleonora...your words are enigmatic and I do not fully comprehend. You are Calypso, but you are also Eleonora? Yet Eleonora also waits for me in Ithaca where she is besieged by belligerent suitors. Are you then that Eleonora?" Calypso nodded.

"Yes, I am she...do not mistake the chimera for the real thing. As you know, danger and misery can be found everywhere in this imperfect world...but Eleonora exists beyond all this and above it: though she might also partake of the world's sadness occasionally too. Forget the Eleonora that waits for you in Ithaca and think only of the Goddess Calypso who stands before you now as Eleonora in everything."

For a full year I remained on Calypso's island enjoying wonderful passion at night with my beloved Eleonora. Furthermore, Calypso's handmaidens looked after my every need so all existence became no more than a pleasant pastime. Yet something continued to gnaw at my insides and illogically,

stupidly, I began to pine away for the Eleonora that still awaited me on the island of Ithaca. Eventually, the situation deteriorated to such an extent that I spent each day on the shoreline of Calypso's island home weeping and bewailing my fate as I looked hopelessly out to sea. Calypso found this difficult to understand and one day she joined me on the seashore.

"Luca, why do you pine away like this? Have I not done everything possible to explain to you how I am truly Eleonora and that the Eleonora who waits for you in Ithaca does not really suffer? (And indeed exists only in your own imagination?) Leave off this continuous lamentation and accept the very special gift that the Gods have granted to you. Here, on this island with me, you will live forever in sexual union with your beloved. Why must you search for misery and destruction when you have already arrived in Elysium?" For a moment I hardly knew what answer I should give to Calypso, but eventually the words came out slowly and haltingly.

"Divine Goddess, know that I belong to the race of men and that we are a group of creatures that must be forever doing. Idleness is not to our taste. I live here with you in a way that should delight the soul, but rather than think of my good fortune, I dwell on the Eleonora in Ithaca that I have lost and will probably never see again. I think of my duty unfulfilled; of the countless suitors that have insulted my beloved and how they will never receive the punishment they deserve. I think of myself living here with you. century after century, millennium after millennium and how nothing will ever change and an icy finger touches my heart; unchanging bliss may eventually become the same as unchanging misery and I fear that in time, as my memories fade, I will

not be able to tell the difference between happiness and sorrow. For these reasons great Queen I beg you to allow me to leave this island and follow my destiny to the island of Ithaca." I saw immediately that my words had wounded Calypso, who could not feel these ambiguities as a human could. After some moments of silence, she spoke.

"Luca, your words have cruelly assaulted my loving heart and I have understood for the first time how your needs press on you to such an extent that you have no understanding of a Goddess' love. Wretched mortal! I have offered you everything, including eternal life—and you have thrown it all back in my face like a petulant child who wishes to have his own way at all costs. I will not let you embark on a course of such gross stupidity. I forbid you to ever talk about this matter again. Accept that you will never leave this island and forget your dreams of Ithaca."

I had expected an angry reply from Calypso and in sheer hopelessness of spirit, I fell once more to beating myself and bewailing my fate. Calypso turned her face from me and began to walk away. It was at that very moment that a thunderbolt hit the earth from on high sending both Calypso and myself scampering for the protective caves. We ceased to flee, however, on the appearance of the King of Gods, Zeus himself, reposing lazily on a cloud, some distance above our heads. His head was grey, but his features wise and benign; his body was that of a superb athlete. He turned his head in the direction of Calypso and began to speak.

"Divine nymph, you cannot hold this human here against his will. His destiny has been decided by the Fates themselves and it shall run through to its preordained close. You must let him build a raft,

provide him with provisions and send him on his way with instructions about how he might best reach Ithaca, his island home. I know that you love him, but his free will has chosen the uncertainty of mortal existence above the majesty of your eternal love and you must agree to let him go. Are my words clear?" Calypso's heart was shattered in a thousand pieces on hearing great Zeus' words, but she answered the thunderer in a composed manner.

"Great Olympian of Olympians, I will do as you say. This mortal creature had won my heart, but if he is unable to understand the great honour I did him by loving him then it is better that he return to his petty squabbles and life of a single moment. I will do even as you say." Zeus nodded and disappeared without adding a single word to his previous theme. Calypso clapped her hands and her servants appeared.

"My maidens, you will give this man all that he requires for a long journey and provide him with any help he needs for the construction of a seafaring raft." Having said these words and without a further glance in my direction, Calypso turned and walked away.

It took me several days to collect and cut the necessary wood for the raft. Eventually, however, I had enough and I started to fasten the logs together with strong twine collected from the trees. While I was doing this, Calypso's handmaidens brought down wine and food provisions for what was likely to prove a long and arduous voyage. I thanked them sincerely and promised to visit Calypso one last time before taking leave of the island. At last all was ready and I resolved to leave at first dawn the next day. That night I visited Calypso in her grotto for the last time. She told me that I was a fool to be leaving

her and that nothing but misery and death would be my reward for rejecting the offer of immortality as her lover. Through that night, Calypso suffered and rejoiced as only a Goddess can and, come the first signs of the dappled with damson dawn, I rose up already exhausted by my exertions of the night.

Perhaps Calypso had hoped that her Godly passion would make me change my mind and stay, but the dawn found me eager to be off on a new adventure. I left the beautiful Goddess softly weeping inside her grotto. Quickly I ran down to the shoreline and pulled the raft out from under the shelter I had made for it. Next, with the use of rolling timbers, I manoeuvred the raft down to the seashore. Having reached the wine dark sea, I pushed off into the new day and muttered a prayer of thanks to the Olympian Gods.

Chapter 7

ITHACA

For what seemed an indeterminate period of time I drifted on Poseidon's ocean; but eventually I came to the island of Crete where great Idomeneus held Kingly sway. There I was welcomed as a comrade-in-arms and given everything I needed to reach Ithaca. Just two days after landing on Crete, a new ship had been fitted out for me and manned with the finest Cretan oarsmen. I stayed for a great farewell banquet given in my honour and left for Ithaca on the third morning of my stay in Crete. The winds were favourable and after several days of hard travelling we reached a beautiful bay—and I recognised my island home of Ithaca. This was not the main island port, but a hidden bay of great beauty known only to a few people. As it was my intention to come to my castle unknown and in disguise, I had instructed the Cretans to leave me in this little known place. The mariners did as I asked and, after setting down some provisions that would help me on my way, they departed and I was alone.

Ithaca! A beautiful land well populated with goats and sheep, courageous warriors and beautiful women: the most beautiful of all, however, was Eleonora my own lady who sat patiently spinning a winding sheet for her Lord before secretly unpicking it through the night. Her long wait was over and soon the suitors who presently surrounded her would all

be dead. The Goddess Athena appeared to me once again in my time of need and changed my outer form to that of a decrepit old man, though inside my natural vigour remained. The Goddess then whisked me off to a place directly outside the castle walls. There she told me to beg for alms outside the main castle entrance. I did as the great Goddess instructed, but quickly realised that by doing this I would create resentment in other beggars who had been in place before me. A man with the shabbiest clothes I had ever seen approached me, smelling of bad fish.

“Hey you, don’t you have any idea of what precedence is? This is my spot and you must seek for another place to beg. Be off with you!” The man’s words immediately riled me up and I raised my stick to shoulder height.

“If you object to my being here old man, then perhaps you would like to try and move me on?” My words made the ragamuffin laugh.

“Look what manner of creature is calling me old!” he shouted out to the gathering crowd of people who were beginning to expect a fray. “Why I’ll give you a good blow on your noggin and hope to beat some sense into you!” The beggar approached, stick in hand, confident of his prowess against an old man in such a clear state of physical degeneration.

As he came into proximity, he swung his stick expecting to hear it rattle on my head. However, what actually happened confused him very much. I easily side-stepped his blow, gave him a push and brought my own stick down upon his head with great force. The man fell to the ground as if he’d been pole-axed and there was an ironic cheer from the people watching. One man, dressed in the clothes of a gentleman, stepped forward.

"Well done old timer. This man has been bothering people in this spot for nearly six months. I would ask you not to now take his place, but to come with me inside the castle and receive a good and hearty meal while I recount your victory to my friends who, like myself, wait upon the lady Eleonora." I couldn't have wished for anything better and I nodded my humble assent. We were conducted inside by the gentleman's servants and on arrival in the great central banquet hall, I was aware that something important was afoot. The assembled noblemen were gathered in groups talking to each other in a highly agitated fashion. On our entrance, one suitor detached himself from a group and came across to speak to us. As he neared our secluded corner and gave me a disapproving look, I recognised him: it was Fabio.

"Hail great Aristides. Who is this filthy creature that accompanies you today?"

"Hail Fabio, son of Gianni. This man bested the old beggar Zeno in a street combat just five minutes ago. I thought his presence might amuse you." Fabio shook his head.

"This is not the time for idle amusements Aristides. We have just heard word from the lady Eleonora that Luca's great longbow is to be brought down to the banquet hall. The first man who can string it and then hit a target will become her new husband." Hearing these words, I knew that the Goddess Athena was directing all action in my favour this day.

Even as Fabio finished speaking, the servants of Eleonora brought the long bow and arrows into the banquet hall. A series of crossed axes was set up and it was announced that the winner must successfully shoot an arrow through the space

between the axes. Fabio was the first to take the bow. He carefully applied the twine to one end of the bow and then, using all his strength, attempted to bend the bow so he could hook on the other end of the twine. However, in spite of all his efforts he failed to depress the sturdy bow even by a fraction. At last, filled with anger and disappointment, he declared the task was an impossible trick and tossed the bow away. Every other man in the room tried to string the bow, but they all met with the same failure as Fabio. At last everyone had tried and Fabio spoke.

"It is a trick. We must now send to the lady Eleonora and inform her that we are tired of her endless stratagems. Let us inform her that she must decide on her new husband this very day or else we will kill her old father." There was a chorus of assent in the hall which dwindled away as I spoke out.

"Let me try!" There was a moment's silence and then a great guffaw of laughter. Fabio, in particular, was highly amused by my offer. Not giving anyone the chance to move or object, I seized the bow and arrows from the old servant who was standing near to me. Using all my strength, I bent the bow and fixed the string. All the suitors gazed at me in astonishment, struck dumb by my unexpected success. I took an arrow from the old quiver, set it in the bow and sent it whizzing through the gap between the axes. Suddenly the suitors found their voices.

"Amazing!"

"Who are you old man?"

"Are you some God in disguise?" I took another arrow from the quiver and set it in the bow.

"I am the rightful lord of this house and Eleonora belongs to me. I am Luca of Ithaca." I saw the fear form in their eyes, but before my words could be

completely taken in, I had released another arrow that pierced Fabio's throat: he dropped to the floor stone dead.

All was pandemonium as I fired off the bow time and time again until twenty or thirty corpses littered the floor. At last, the remaining suitors made a desperate rush for the main exit and escaped outside. There, they were hunted down by soldiers loyal to myself who were overjoyed at the return of their old King. With some trepidation in my heart I mounted the stairs to my lady's chamber and knocked on her door. A well known voice issued out from behind the door.

"Yes? Who is it?"

"Eleonora, it's me. I told you I'd return and now you see that I have kept my word." There was a hurried pulling back of bolts before the door was flung open. Standing before me, in all her regal paraphernalia, was the delectable Eleonora. She looked at me with her ironic, smiling eyes and then gave that dark, throaty chuckle that I knew so well.

"What kept you so long, big boy?"

Chapter 8

TELEGONUS

For some years I enjoyed my status as great King returned from the Trojan War. My subjects were overjoyed to have me back and even Eleonora was sweeter than usual. I got into the habit of going for long morning walks on my estate and talking to the farmers and goatherds who worked there. One day, when I was passing through a particularly barren and desolate stretch of land, the Goddess Athena appeared before me in all her effulgent beauty and told me to sit down on a nearby rock while she narrated the things that my future held in store.

“Great Luca, you have suffered much, but it is my sad duty to inform you that your sorrow is far from terminated. These events that are to come should not catch a great one, such as yourself, unawares. Know then that the sorceress Circe has given birth to a child to whom you are the father. His name is Telegonus. Circe has told many stories to Telegonus of his great father, Giovanni of Ithaca. Now, Telegonus has reached the state of manhood and has decided to leave his island home to search for you.” Circe’s words filled me with an unexpected joy. I had an unknown son! Furthermore, he was searching for me and no doubt would sooner or later reach my island home.

“Great Goddess, this news fills me with unlooked for pleasure. When Telegonus arrives, he will be treated with every dignity befitting the son of a King.” Athena shook her head sadly.

“I have more to tell you, Dear Luca, destroyer of hearts. It is fated that you will meet Telegonus in an unknown guise. Neither you nor he will recognise the other. Suffering from a misapprehension, the two of you will fight and, due to a cast of destiny’s dice, Telegonus will kill you. After your death, the truth will be revealed and poor Telegonus will tear his hair and curse the day he was born. However, your death at his hands will be irreversible.” Athena’s words had stupefied me and for some moments I found myself unable to answer in a coherent manner. Eventually, however, I stuttered out a question on the matter that worried me most.

“And Eleonora? What will happen to my lady Eleonora?” I saw a deep sadness enter into great Athena’s eyes.

“Do not worry for her, dear Luca Her destiny, like yours, has been decided and is now immutable. After your death, Telegonus will take Eleonora back to Circe’s island where, after a mourning spell, he will marry her. Great Zeus, not wanting to see the lovely Eleonora age, will later take her from Telegonus and transform her into a bright star in the heavens that will guide lost mariners for all future time.” With these last words, the great Goddess disappeared from my sight and I lowered my head into my hands, totally bewildered by the future happenings she had narrated.

Was it all true? Was I really to die at the hands of my own son who would then go on to marry Eleonora himself? It was blasphemous to even ask the question. I had received the information from the

great Goddess Athena and I knew that she spoke only the truth. What a tragedy; to be killed by my own unknown son and to realise in my dying moments that this was the one who had deprived me of Eleonora forever more! It was some bitter consolation to know that Eleonora herself was never to belong for a lifetime to any man—but while her light shone in the heavens, where would I be? Would great Zeus place me in Hades or Elysium? Either way, it was my destiny to be separated from Eleonora for all eternity. I began to cry uncontrollably and could not stop.

PART THREE

Chapter 9

EVA

Eva was tired of Sharokh. It had happened gradually and at the beginning of their relationship she had felt herself to be deeply in love with him. However, she had been a young girl then, straight from the university in Dusseldorf. In Germany she had studied Italian language and civilization and coming out to Italy in order to pursue research at the University of Rome had been a dream come true. She was open and receptive to romantic possibilities of all kinds. Sharokh's situation had also appealed to her politics of enlightened liberalism (tinged with romanticism). Through, no fault of his own, poor Sharokh had been deprived of his birthright and his family scattered around the world.

At that time, Sharokh was living in Perugia with his brother; both of them worked in a small hotel run by people of Middle Eastern origin. They had met through Eva's political activities in the university, particularly aimed at giving academic help to well qualified and intelligent refugees. One day Sharokh had arranged an appointment with her to explain the particular problems faced by refugees of the Iranian revolution. They had spent the day in passionate debate about the world's inequalities and the night in frenzied love-making at Eva's apartment. Since that time they had been, as people say, "an item".

At first, the two of them had been content enough. They had been young and the strength of their mutual love had been sufficient to sustain them. The real problems began when Eva's research grant ran out: suddenly they didn't have enough money. Sharokh had offered to work double time at the hotel, but Eva didn't want to stay in or near the eternal city with nothing to do. A friend of hers, a German girl from Bonn, had suggested she go to Parma which at that time was being touted as the richest city in Italy. Eva had liked the idea. She felt sure that she'd easily pick up a well paying job and even Sharokh would probably have more choice there too. For these reasons—and in spite of Sharokh's vociferous protestations—Eva had decided to take the risk and go to Parma. Between the two of them, their savings amounted to about twenty million Italian lire and Eva had guessed that this would last them for around six months—plenty of time to find a job, as she had thought.

Problems had begun almost immediately upon arrival. They had expected to live in a hotel for around two weeks to a month, but had finished by spending almost six months there. Sharokh had got a job in a pizzeria, but Parma had turned out to be even more expensive than they had expected and their resources, even with Sharokh's contribution, were running dangerously thin when, after nearly six months, they had been offered the apartment in Felino. The price was more or less within their range, but the fact that they needed to pay six months rent in advance had been a major stumbling block. The problem had only been resolved by desperate phone calls to Eva's parents in Germany who had agreed to make them a substantial loan.

After, finding a base in Felino, it seemed their luck had changed. First, Sharokh had got a better paying job in a local factory and then, a couple of weeks later, Eva had found work as a German interpreter. It had seemed like their problems were finally behind them, but a subtle change had come over Eva's relationship with Sharokh. In spite of herself, Eva had frequently found that she was dwelling on Sharokh's helplessness in negative terms. She knew it wasn't really his fault, but what had seemed romantic and exotic to a young girl in Rome now appeared ineffective and embarrassing to a maturing woman in her late twenties. Furthermore, Sharokh's absolute dependence on her had slowly become irksome. He was still classified as a refugee and could be expelled from Italy at any moment; in many ways, in the eyes of the state and of other Italians, Sharokh was almost a non-person: he simply didn't exist. All this was becoming an irritant for Eva and, in addition, it was she and her family who had to bear almost all the financial weight. Finally, because Sharokh was working so much, she hardly got to see him during the day or the night and their love making had become brief and perfunctory.

It was at this time that she had first met Luke. Luke had inhabited another world to Sharokh's and he always seemed to have plenty of time and money on his hands. While Sharokh had been slaving away in the factory during their first months in Parma, Eva had been getting to know Luke intimately. In fact it was Eleonora who had first introduced them—to her later regret. Eleonora and her friend Fabio had also put them on to the availability of the apartment in Felino, so Eva really should have felt some gratitude to the Italian girl—but she didn't.

While Eleonora had attended the university, studied and worked in the evenings, Eva had got to know Luke well—very well. Nevertheless, Eva was frustrated by the fact that her relationship with Luke had not yet been sexually consummated. She had made it clear in a hundred ways that she was ready and willing, but Luke had always made some last minute excuse to avoid going to bed with her. In her heart of hearts, Eva felt that the reason for this was Eleonora: Luke knew that the Italian girl would never forgive him for sleeping with a girl who she had introduced him to: a girl who had been her friend. The situation then, was difficult and problematic. However, Eva had a plan to set things right tonight.

Today's date was 14 of February and while most of the population would be aware that this date signified the fact that Saint Valentine's day was upon us, Eva felt strangely certain that Luke would be oblivious of the fact. For this reason she had arranged to meet Luke at seven-thirty that night. Furthermore, she had made an excuse about wanting to return a book to Eleonora to fix Dr. Benedetti's surgery as the meeting place. As she had suspected, Luke had acquiesced easily enough, happy to have another excuse to meet with Eleonora. The book, on Italian singers, was real enough, but Eva expected that Eleonora had, by this time, forgotten all about lending it to her only a few weeks after her arrival from Rome. Everything was set then. As always, Sharokh was working late and he would pick Eva up in Piazza Garibaldi at eleven. However, it was Eva's wish that by that time some fundamental changes would have taken place or be in the process of taking place. Several people were in for a shock tonight.

Eva's work was irregular in terms of its schedule and after a few hours in the morning she had returned to Felino to clean the place up and do some necessary shopping. She had a wild hope in her heart that something fundamental might be about to shift on the domestic front and her mood felt lighter than had mostly been the case of late. At six o' clock, she took the scheduled bus to Parma which took about an hour to arrive. It was raining, yet the weather did nothing to lower her spirits. She had been building up to this move for several months now and felt a certain elation that things were about to come to a head.

Eva arrived in Parma several minutes after seven. It was still raining, but fortunately she had brought along her umbrella. Eleonora's office was a good fifteen minutes walk from where the bus had dropped her, so it would be about seven-twenty by the time Eva arrived. The German girl decided that it would make good sense to go up ten minutes early in order to give Eleonora the book and engage her in conversation. After that, Luke would arrive and the evening's surprises begin. Eva could hardly wait.

Parma seemed deserted as Eva made her way to Eleonora's office. The rain had eased off and it wasn't necessary for the German girl to open her umbrella again. As of yet, however, the bourgeois population of Parma hadn't acquired the necessary confidence to walk abroad. At seven-twenty Eva arrived at the office block in which Benedetti's lay. She pressed the intercom and immediately heard Eleonora's rich voice answer.

Si? Chi e'?

Sono io, cara: Eva. Avevo intenzione da sempre di restituirti il libro sulla musica. Stasera l'ho portato

con me. There was a brief pause. After a moment, however, Eleonora responded with courtesy.

Va bene Eva. Grazie mille. Vieni su. The heavy door jerked open and Eva slipped easily inside. A smile was playing on her lips as she climbed up to the first floor and was accompanied into the office by the waiting Eleonora. The Italian girl had a polite smile on her face as she kissed Eva on both cheeks.

Che piacere rivederti. Non era importante. Puoi anche tenere il libro. Comunque, sono contento che sei venuta. Come stai?

Sto bene grazie, responded Eva slowly. "It's my intention to meet someone for a special meal tonight and I thought that you wouldn't mind if I set up the meeting here?" For a moment Eleonora looked puzzled, but then she responded in a hearty manner.

"I see. There is a special someone that you are seeing for a Valentine's Day meal?" The Italian girl's eyes twinkled. "Could it possibly be Sharokh that you are expecting?" Eva smiled.

"That would be telling. At any rate, he'll be here in a few minutes. Can we sit down to wait?" Eleonora, laughing and smiling, conducted little Eva to the chair opposite her own desk and the two European girls sat down. Eleonora was about to initiate a little small talk when someone rang the bell downstairs.

"Oh that must be him now", exclaimed Eva. "It seems he's a few minutes early." Eleonora laughed.

"Of course. Anyone can see that Sharokh would cross the oceans of the world in order to spend a little extra time with you." The Italian girl had opened the door immediately on hearing the bell. Now a figure appeared in the glass doorway. However, it wasn't Sharokh. It was Luke. He gave the door a

push and it opened automatically. Eva was amused to see the look on Eleonora's face: a mixture of amazement and rage. Luke, who was staring at Eleonora, seemed surprised at the intensity of the Italian girl's look. He hurried forward into the office with a plastic smile on his face.

"Well, here I am: just about made it in time! Have you been waiting long Eva?" Eva shook her head lightly. "No, not at all Luke; just a few minutes. I was glad to have the opportunity to chat a little with Eleonora." By this time, the Italian girl's face was blood red with rage and Eva thought that she might even have difficulty speaking. However, she was wrong about this. With a great effort, Eleonora greeted Luke in an even voice.

"*Ciao bello*; you didn't tell me that you and Eva were eating dinner tonight."

"Was it an important omission?" asked Luke, seemingly mystified.

"No, no", replied Eleonora quickly. "Of course not. Why should you tell me? I certainly don't tell you everything concerning my personal plans." Luke looked a little bewildered. It was clear to him that Eleonora was deeply irritated, but he clearly had no idea of the cause. Vaguely, he connected it with the surprise of seeing Eva alone in his company; yet this didn't seem enough to explain Eleonora's profound discomfiture.

"Well, shall we go?" enquired Eva. "I've booked the table for eight o' clock, but there's bound to be a crowd there." Luke seemed lost in his own thoughts and didn't reply.

"And where have you booked the meal for?" enquired Eleonora in a dangerously even tone.

"Oh tonight we'll be going to 'Sergio's'", responded Eva. 'Sergio's' was one of the most

exclusive and expensive restaurants in Parma. Eleonora said nothing, but her face had changed from red to black. At this point Luke re-entered the conversation.

"Listen Eleonora, I didn't know that Eva had booked us into such an exotic place. I'm going to feel rather out of place. Why don't you come along too? As a local and a sophisticated woman of the world, you will give us a certain amount of high class credibility. I'm sure you can get away early from this place if you want to." Eleonora's response was cold.

"I have my own plans for tonight. Fabio and I will be going to a restaurant near where we live." Luke looked like he'd taken a slap in the face.

"I thought you two would be studying as usual", he replied lamely.

"Not tonight", insisted Eleonora with emphasis. After our meal we'll probably go on to a disco in Milan." Luke didn't reply, but his face was deeply troubled. Eva decided that the time had come to end this little comedy and move on to the evening's next scene.

"We should really get going Luke. We can't be late for Sergio, or he'll give our table to someone else." Luke nodded his compliance, still looking at the now indifferent face of Eleonora. He knew that something fundamental had happened, but still didn't know what it was. He looked around for consolation and found it as Eva grasped him by the hand.

"Come on, Luke. We have to be getting a move on. It will take us fifteen minutes to walk to the restaurant." Eleonora couldn't conceal a sneer.

"Yes, you should be going. I have work to do and also need to phone Fabio in order to finalise the details of our evening. Don't let me keep you." Eva

pulled on Luke's hand and drew him across to the door. He was still looking at the top of Eleonora's head, which was now bent over a document on her desk, in a bewildered fashion.

"Good night, Eleonora; we'll see you later", called out Eva. "Have a good night with Fabio!" With these last words, Eva pulled Luke reluctantly from the room and, hand in hand, they descended the old staircase. Outside it was raining once again. Eva was in a bright mood, but Luke seemed listless and dull. A few more people were now out and about despite the rain. 'Sergio's' restaurant was over the bridge and towards the John F. Kennedy Park. Eva calculated that they would comfortably arrive before eight o' clock. When they had walked about half the distance, Luke seemed to emerge from a deep reverie.

"Did you think that Eleonora's behaviour seemed odd?" he asked of Eva in a puzzled way. Eva shook her head.

"Not really. No doubt she has a lot on her mind with all the exams she has coming up." Luke nodded his head dubiously and lapsed once again into a thoughtful silence.

About five minutes later the two *stranieri* reached 'Sergio's' on the edge of the park. Inside, the restaurant was seething with gaily dressed people and on every table there was a vase of red roses and a San Valentino greeting card. As a waitress led Eva and Luke to their table, a look of enlightenment passed over the latter's face. When they were alone with their menus, Luke asked Eva a question that was really more a statement of fact than an enquiry.

"Today is Saint Valentine's day?" Eva nodded her head.

“So it seems. To tell you the truth I’d completely forgotten, but that explains why the restaurant is so crowded tonight.” Luke didn’t reply.

The rest of the evening was passed in a rather tense fashion. Neither Eva nor Luke could admit to understanding what had happened, but it was clear that both Eleonora and Luke had been out manoeuvred by the German girl on this occasion. Eva made a lot of small talk, but Luke was hardly responsive. Clearly his mind was elsewhere and Eva had some sudden qualms about what she’d planned for later in the evening. Luke appeared so wretched that it looked like all he really wanted to do was go home as early as possible.

At the end of the evening, Eva insisted on paying the bill and Luke did nothing to stop her. Outside the restaurant, Eva requested Luke’s company to Piazza Garibaldi where Sharokh was to meet her at eleven. Eva saw hesitation in Luke’s eyes and realised that he was actually on the verge of excusing himself. However, his good manners reasserted themselves at the final moment and he reluctantly acquiesced.

As Eva and Luke walked from ‘Sergio’s’ to Piazza Garibaldi, the street presented a complete contrast to its earlier desolation. It seemed that every couple in Parma had suddenly come out in force and were striding up and down the thoroughfare arm in arm. This time Eva didn’t dare take Luke’s hand as she had earlier in the evening.

By the time Eva and Luke reached the Piazza, the time was ten-forty-five: Sharokh would not be there for fifteen minutes and Eva decided the time had come to put into operation the second part of her plan. Turning to Luke, she began to speak bitterly of Sharokh.

"I imagine that Sharokh will be late. I'm not even sure if he will come. For the last few weeks we have done nothing but fight. I'm afraid that the love and affection which bound us together is not what it once was." Luke said nothing and his face remained impassive. Eva continued with her complaints about her lover. "I feel Sharokh is not the man I once knew. He has changed for the worse and become too dependent on me. It is difficult for me to respect him in the way I did before." Luke shook his head in a negative gesture.

"Sharokh is a good man." The words sounded insincere. It may have been an accurate statement, but its truth would merely have demonstrated the hypocrisy of both of them. Eva gripped Luke's hand tightly.

"Let's get away from here", insisted the German girl. "I don't want to see Sharokh tonight. We could stay in a hotel..." Luke made a dismissive gesture.

"It's no good Eva. It wouldn't work." The German girl felt stunned by Luke's response. She had worked everything out so carefully for this evening; this should have been the moment of her sweetest triumph, but instead everything was falling apart.

"Luke, I know that you have feelings for me", she began again desperately, clutching Luke's hand ever tighter. "Forget about Eleonora, she is not worth your time and effort." Luke withdrew his hand stiffly and pointed to a black car that was drawing up on the corner.

"It looks like Sharokh has arrived here a few minutes early", he observed coldly. As Eva shifted her glance in the direction indicated, her senses confirmed the truth of Luke's words. It was Sharokh looking curiously in their direction. Everything had failed; the evening that had started out so favourably

was now left in ruins. Without another glance at Luke, Eva hurried over to where Sharokh's car was waiting. She climbed in and, after a few moments, Sharokh drove off.

Luke was left alone, a pensive expression on his face. It had started to rain again.

Chapter 10

ELEONORA AGAIN

Now that everything was finished with Eva, Luke wondered if there was any hope of making things work with Eleonora. However, all the same barriers remained and, although Fabio didn't seem to be a serious candidate for lifetime partner, he was necessary to Eleonora in the short term. His father was rich and influential and no doubt capable of pulling a few strings at the university. In the end, however, Luke knew that Fabio had one fatal flaw from Eleonora's point of view: he was too dependent on her. The Italian girl found it difficult to respect a man who subjugated himself to her. On the other hand, she insisted on absolute control in her relationships, so there was a major contradiction in her emotional psyche that led to the eventual break up of most of her love affairs.

Over a period of several months, Luke drifted further away from the old crowd and saw less and less of Eleonora. One night at about eight, he was passing Eleonora's office and decided to go up and say hello. As he climbed the familiar stairs (he had found the door already open) he was surprised at how nervous he was feeling. Everything was long over between Eleonora and he—wasn't it? They occupied different worlds and prioritised different things. A long term relationship (as Lia had said) would probably finish with some unspeakable event:

a death, prison or perhaps both. Although Eleonora was by nature a very kind person, she could be callous and cruel with those closest to her and in the extremity of her passionate anger there was no barrier that she would not cross. Luke himself could also be perverse and cruel sometimes, so that the fire they created together was of a white hot intensity and frequently threatened to consume them both. Sometimes, it seemed to Luke, that his life would have been nobler if he'd been ready to immolate himself on Eleonora's pyre of the vanities. However, he knew that the depth of their passion was destabilising and that the likelihood was that one of them or both would be destroyed in any long term relationship. Furthermore, Eleonora had made it clear in a thousand ways that she wanted Luke out of her life (hadn't she?)

When Luke reached the first floor landing he looked through the glass door and, as he'd expected, there was Eleonora bent over her desk writing something. Taking a deep breath Luke pushed open the transparent door and walked in. As the door opened an automatic beep sounded and Eleonora looked up from her desk; the fire in her eyes and the snarl on her lips made it clear to Luke that his presence was not welcome to her. Without a word of welcome, the Italian girl continued with the writing task she had set herself. Luke walked over to where she sat and slumped into the chair opposite her. For a few seconds neither person said anything; finally Luke broke the silence.

"Are you working on something important?" Eleonora looked up from her task with glittering eyes.

"More important than wasting my time talking to you", she replied harshly. Clearly, Luke noted, his

recent absence had not made Eleonora's heart grow fonder. He smiled and responded lightly.

"Is it a love note for Fabio or some other lucky man?" Eleonora took a pen and threw it at Luke's head. Fortunately for Luke her aim was not very good and it missed him by several inches before hitting the wall and dropping to the ground.

"Why are you always such a smart ass?" demanded the Italian girl, clearly in a hot temper. "Did I ask you to come here tonight? Get the hell out and leave me alone!"

Luke was shocked at the vehemence of Eleonora's anger, though she had always been extreme in her moods and liable to break somebody or something when a black temper descended on her. Still he hadn't been expecting to find Eleonora in such a foul mood as this.

"I was passing and decided to come and say hello", responded Luke stubbornly. Why, he asked himself, had he come to Eleonora's office this evening? Merely to have an argument? Or was there still some secret hope or dependency in his heart? Eleonora openly sneered at his words.

"Don't make me laugh! You are too selfish and only ever think about yourself. Are you looking for a quick lay? I assure you that you won't get it from me: I like to protect myself from Aids!" Luke was silent at Eleonora's words. He felt genuine sorrow that things had apparently reached such a low ebb between them. Eleonora picked up another pen and continued with her writing. After a few moments the phone rang and the Italian girl answered it.

Pronto? Ciao Fabio. Si, sarò a casa fra poco. Smetti di studiare ora: berremo una tazza di tè a casa e usciremo mezz'ora dopo il mio arrivo.

Luke listened to the words sulkily. Obviously Eleonora and Fabio were going out somewhere that evening and Fabio had phoned in order to make sure that everything was going to plan. As the Italian girl spoke, Luke suddenly felt an overwhelming sense of grief at his loss and a tactile urge to embrace Eleonora came over him. Usually he would have resisted such a temptation, but now he felt that there was little left to lose and, after all, as Eleonora had said, he had always been a selfish person. Right now all he wanted to do was put a spoke in the wheel of Eleonora's plans.

Eleonora had risen from her desk on answering the telephone, as the instrument rested on a parallel table to her left. Right now, her back was turned to Luke and she seemed to be paying him little attention. Silently, Luke rose from his seat and crept around the table so that he was directly behind Eleonora. Without knowing of his presence, the Italian girl continued to prattle on the telephone.

Si, e' stata una notte noiosa, she was saying as Luke's hand came up behind her bottom and goosed her (presumably believing that an embrace would have been unsuitable to the peculiar circumstances of their present estrangement). On feeling the hand tightly clasping her right buttock Eleonora dropped the phone and spun on her heels by one hundred and eighty degrees. Almost without a pause, her foot shot out and gave Luke a painful kick on the shin. Like the Italian girl before him, Luke made no audible sound. As the green, cat-like eyes glittered at him, he could not help feeling gratified that his little stratagem had resulted in physical contact between them. Anything was better than listening to Eleonora on the phone baiting him with Fabio. At last, the Italian girl spoke in a harsh whisper.

"You'd better get the hell out of here, or I'll call the management." Luke ignored Eleonora's words and instead watched the new calm that had settled in her eyes. He leaned forward, kissed her forehead and ran his fingers through the thick red hair. Eleonora did nothing to stop him seeming becalmed and even strangely receptive to Luke's advances. At that moment, an inner office door opened and Dr. Bertinotti himself emerged from his surgery. He nodded at Luke whom he knew from previous visits and then addressed himself to Eleonora.

"I think we can lock up the surgery a little earlier than usual tonight, Eleonora: things seem to be quiet. I'm going right now and you can leave too after checking things and locking up." The Italian girl reacted quickly to Bertinotti's words.

"Oh wait a moment, Alfredo. I'm just coming down too. Everything is already checked and I only need to lock the door behind us." Eleonora almost ran across to where Bertinotti stood framed in the doorway and Luke reluctantly followed. Bertinotti gave a suspicious glance in Luke's direction, well knowing the tempestuous nature of his relationship with Eleonora. Having understood something of what was going on, Bertinotti was now determined to see Eleonora safely out of the building. The Italian secretary locked the door and descended the stairs ahead of Bertinotti. Luke brought up the rear. When the three of them emerged from out of the office building, Eleonora quickly wished both Bertinotti and Luke a formal good night and wasted no time in crossing the road over to the apartment block where she lived. Luke gazed lugubriously after her and Bertinotti, taking pity on him, asked if he needed a lift anywhere. Luke shook his head and walked away quickly in the opposite direction.

It had begun to drizzle lightly.

ÉPILOGUE

What more to say? I saw her again twice before leaving for England: both times on the same day.

The night before my departure, I had arranged to see Paolo Rossini, an old friend from nearby Montecchio, in the great central square of Parma, where all the tables had long since been laid out under the starry and mild Italian summer nights.

On the afternoon of that same day, I had gone to the 'Oktoberfest' for a drink and a chat with the Sicilian owner, Paolo Corradi, and his sons. We'd been sitting talking and joking together when Eleonora suddenly appeared from around the corner, coming from the direction of the university. She was alone, and wore dark sunglasses. As she saw my face through the window, she turned her head and I made a sign of acknowledgement. She stopped suddenly, took off her dark glasses, and walked along to the entrance of the *birreria* without once looking at me again. I sat inside the cool building wearing my own dark glasses and, although I was looking straight at her as she approached, she probably couldn't have seen my eyes. She popped her head around the door and made a casual remark about the ever increasing heat, to which Paolo grunted and concurred. After this she left, and I could see a strange and self-satisfied smile playing around the corners of her lips as she disappeared past the glass walls of the *birreria*.

It must have been about nine-thirty that evening when I approached the central Parma square in the company of Paolo Rossini. As we neared the serried ranks of tables and vibrant, animated people, I could see Eleonora bending down and talking to someone. Fabio and Elvira stood a respectable distance away, waiting for her to complete her conversation. Paolo and I took our seats at one of the few vacant tables. After a moment, she finished talking, and I saw the three of them begin to drift off towards her home. I was sure that Eleonora hadn't seen me, but felt equally certain that she would soon be appraised of the fact of my presence by Elvira, who had undoubtedly seen me.

It would have been about an hour later that I saw Eleonora passing before my field of vision. I was sitting with my back to the bar, facing Paolo and the main thoroughfare. Eleonora was walking by, just a little beyond the last rows of tables laid out in the vibrant Garibaldi Square. She was walking slowly and somewhat self-consciously along, swinging her arms from side to side, and smiling straight ahead into the heart of the summer night. The course of her direction was so obviously arranged to perfectly bisect my range of vision that I could not doubt that all aspects of this masque like procession had been exactly planned.

Following Eleonora came Elvira and Fabio walking together some distance behind. Elvira was looking wretched—though Fabio was attempting to make a little desultory conversation.

Slowly, ever so very slowly, this strange and unique procession passed around the outskirts of the crowded square, actors on the stage of some continuing aesthetic drama, being minutely observed by their tired, but still receptive public.

And so it would always prove, I suddenly thought. There was a fundamental basic principle operating in each of our lives—and mine had its root in Eleonora. Always, I would find myself in search of her enigmatic loveliness, and always, it would be necessary for me to feel this heavy burden of suffering in my heart. And time and time again I would lose her, only to discover her unsurpassed and unsurpassable opulence anew. The lines of fate were fixed—if contrary—and the sumptuous truths and secrets which lay inside the concurrence of our mutual hearts would always reverberate as on this summer night, proving perpetually too strong and beautifully insinuating for rational explanation.

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